

The Memory Prison

Carceral and Sacred Space in an Ekphrasis by John Climacus

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Among the most ancient and affecting techniques in Greek rhetoric is ekphrasis.¹ It is a type of “speech that brings the subject matter vividly before the eyes.”² The *Progymnasmata*, the textbooks for rhetoric used in Greek schools across the Roman Empire, transmitted this definition.³ They upheld various passages from ancient authors as examples, the foremost being the making of arms in Homer, the long description of Achilles’ shield in book eighteen of the *Iliad*.⁴ Because of the popularity of the *hoplopoia*, nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers privileged the objet d’art as the topic of an ekphrasis, although originally, the descriptive focus could concern a range of phenomena.⁵ Ailius Theon’s first-century *Progymnasmata* lists “events,

persons, places, times, the manner in which something is done” as potential categories.⁶ A later, fourth-century *Progymnasmata* attributed to Aphthonios teaches another form, one less static and yielding, called the mixed ekphrasis:

Some ekphraseis are simple, others mixed; simple such as those relating infantry battles or sea battles, mixed such as those combining events and times, as Thucydides describes the night battle in Sicily; for along with his account of how the battle was fought he also defined what it was like at night.⁷

Here, Aphthonios references the Battle of Epipolae during the Athenian military expedition to Sicily in the Peloponnesian War. In his description of it, Thucydides achieves a mixed ekphrasis by narrating not just army maneuvers but also nocturnal darkness, even mass panic

1 The literature on ekphrasis is enormous. For a thorough synthesis of scholarship on late antique and Byzantine Greek ekphrasis, see R. Betancourt, *Sight, Touch, and Imagination in Byzantium* (Cambridge, 2018); R. Webb, *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice* (London, 2009).

2 Theon, *Progymnasmata* 118.6 (Webb, *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion*, 199): “Ἐκφρασις ἔστι λόγος περιγγηματικὸς ἐναργῶς ὑπ’ ὅψιν ἀγων τὸ δηλούμενον. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine.

3 Webb, *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion*, 39–59; G. A. Kennedy, *Progymnasmata: Greek Textbooks of Prose Composition and Rhetoric* (Atlanta, 2003).

4 On the ekphrasis of the shield’s legacy, M. Squire, “Ekphrasis at the Forge and the Forging of Ekphrasis: ‘The Shield of Achilles’ in Graeco-Roman Word and Image,” *Word & Image* 29.2 (2013): 157–91; Webb, *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion*, 2–3.

5 Webb, *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion*, 28–38, 61–70; J. Elsner, “The Genres of Ekphrasis,” *Ramus* 31 (2002): 1–18. On the

modern and ancient distinction, see R. Webb, “Ekphrasis Ancient and Modern: The Invention of a Genre,” *Word & Image* 15.1 (1999): 7–18.

6 Theon, *Progymnasmata* 118.6 (trans in. Webb, *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion*, 197).

7 Τῶν δὲ ἐκφράσεων αἱ μὲν εἰσιν ἀπλᾶι, αἱ δὲ συνεζευγμέναι. καὶ ἀπλαῖ μὲν ὡς αἱ πεζομαχίας ἢ ναυμαχίας διεξερχόμεναι, συνεζευγμέναι δὲ ὡς αἱ πράγματα καὶ καιροὺς ἀμα συνάπτουσαι, ὥσπερ ὁ Θουκυδίδης τὴν ἐν Σικελίᾳ νυκτομαχίαν ἐκφράζει. μετὰ γὰρ τῆς μάχης ὅπως ἐπράττετο καὶ νυκτός ὅπως εἶχεν ώριστο. Aphthonios, *Progymnasmata* (trans. in Webb, *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion*, 202).

and disorientation.⁸ By the late antique and Byzantine periods, the complex ekphrasis was particularly suited for the encomia of Christian sacred spaces.⁹

While descriptions of places had ancient precedent, Christian ekphrasis expanded the form by including metaphysical embellishment.¹⁰ For example, in his ekphrasis of Hagia Sophia, the courtier Paul the Silentary (520–580) does not reduce the great church to architectural components. Rather, he creates an entire paradisiacal cosmos within its walls. Through his rhetoric, an array of shapes, sounds, and surfaces shimmer and blossom.¹¹ Using such a source, scholars largely conceive of Christian sacred space in late antiquity according to an aesthetics of Edenic growth.¹² This essay, however, introduces a text unrecognized within surveys of ekphrasis and one evocative of an altogether different model of sanctity. Originating in seventh-century Egypt, it survives in one of the most widely read treatises on monasticism in Greek, *The Heavenly Ladder* by John of Sinai (579–659), also known as John Climacus (*tes Klimakos*, “of the Ladder”).¹³

⁸ Thucydides, *History* 7.44 (C. F. Smith, trans., *Thucydides: History of the Peloponnesian War*, vol. 4 [Cambridge, MA, 1958], 87–88).

⁹ R. Webb, “The Aesthetics of Sacred Space: Narrative, Metaphor, and Motion in ‘Ekphraseis’ of Church Buildings,” *DOP* 53 (1999): 59–74, esp. 64–66. On ekphrases within this period, see C. Mango, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire, 312–1453* (Toronto, 1986), 55–149.

¹⁰ J. DeLaine, “The Temple of Hadrian at Cyzicus and Roman Attitudes to Exceptional Construction,” *BSR* 70 (2002): 205–30; Webb, “Aesthetics of Sacred Space,” 66; L. Pernot, *La rhétorique de l’elogie dans le monde gréco-romain* (Paris, 1994).

¹¹ On Edenic rhetoric and aesthetics, see H. Maguire, *Nectar and Illusion: Nature in Byzantine Art and Literature* (Oxford, 2016); B. Pentcheva, “Hagia Sophia and Multisensory Aesthetics,” *Gesta* 50.2 (2011): 51–69; F. Barry, “Walking on Water: Cosmic Floors from Antiquity and the Middle Ages,” *ArtB* 89.4 (2007): 627–56.

¹² Since P. Friedländer, *Johannes von Gaza, Paulus Silentarius* (Leipzig, 1912).

¹³ The text has been translated into English as *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* as well: C. Luibheid and N. Russell, trans., *John Climacus: The Ladder of Divine Ascent* (New York, 1982). The text still lacks a modern critical edition. The translations presented here are based on P. Trevisan, ed., *S. Giovanni Climaco: Scala paradisi*, 2 vols. (Turin, 1941), which derives from the 1633 critical edition by the Jesuit Matthew Rader. Rader’s edition was used in PG 88:624A–1164D (1864). I rely on this edition because previous studies in *DOP*, such as J. Duffy, “Embellishing the Steps: Elements of Presentation and Style in ‘The Heavenly Ladder’ of John Climacus,” *DOP* 53 (1999): 1–17, refer both to Luibheid and Russell as well as Trevisan. An alternative is S. Monachos, ed., *Κλήμαξ* (Constantinople, 1883). For recent studies with up-to-date bibliography that draw attention to John’s rhetorical

In the fifth step of his thirty-one-step treatise, in a discourse titled, “Painstaking and Vivid [ἐναργοῦς] Penitence,” Climacus transports his audience to a place called the Prison (τῆς φυλακῆς).¹⁴ Climacus is clear from the very beginning about his aspiration to vivid description: “to call it a prison or [house for the] condemned was an accurate description. Just the sight of the space [χώρου] would teach you penitence and mourning.”¹⁵ What follows is a highly complex, mixed ekphrasis evoking action, appearances, rituals, gestures, and emotions with remarkable vividness. Hardly just a description of a *topos* in parts, Climacus’s ekphrasis constructs a multisensory hell on Earth.

We will examine several passages in step five in detail, but for now it is necessary to introduce a summary of the section. Climacus begins by saying that he had heard of a place, as if by legend, outside the boundaries of a monastery called the Prison.¹⁶ After receiving

background: A. Torrance, “Scaling the Text: The Ambiguity of the Book in John Climacus,” *BZ* 111.3 (2018): 793–808; J. Zecher, *The Role of Death in the Ladder of Divine Ascent and the Greek Ascetic Tradition* (Oxford, 2015); H. R. Johnsén, *Reading John Climacus: Rhetorical Argumentation, Literary Convention and the Tradition of Monastic Formation* (Lund, 2007). For analysis of the debate over John’s dates incorporating the opinions of J. Chryssavgis, D. Chitty, and D. Bogdanovic, see Zecher, *The Role of Death*, 30–34; see also M.-J. Pierre, “Unité de lieu dans la vie et l’oeuvre de Jean Climaque,” in *Pensée grecque et sagesse d’Orient: Hommage à Michel Tardieu*, Bibliothèque de l’École des hautes études, Sciences religieuses 142, ed. M. A. Amir-Moezzi, J. D. Dubois, C. Jullien, and F. Jullien (Turnhout, 2009); A. Müller, *Das Konzept des geistlichen Gehorsams bei Johannes Sinaites* (Heidelberg, 2006).

¹⁴ Rader transmits the title as “Περὶ μετανοίας μεμεριψημένης καὶ ἐναργοῦς, ἐν ᾧ καὶ βίος τῶν ἀγίων καταδίκων. καὶ περὶ τῆς φυλακῆς”: John Climacus, *The Heavenly Ladder* 5:46 (Trevisan, *Scala paradisi*, 1:205). On step five specifically, see L. Perrone, “Prayer in Prison: The Redeeming Inferno of John Climacus,” in *Between Sea and Desert: On Kings, Nomads, Cities and Monks; Essays in Honor of Joseph Patrick, Land of Galilee* 5, ed., O. Peleg-Barkat, U. Leibner, M. Aviam, and R. Talgam (Tzemach, 2019), 245–72. On carceral spaces in the Mediterranean before Climacus, see M. Letteney and M. Larsen, “A Roman Prison at Lambaesis,” *Studies in Late Antiquity* 5.1 (2021): 65–102; M. Larsen, “Carceral Practices and Geographies in Roman North Africa: A Case Study,” *Studies in Late Antiquity* 3.4 (2019): 547–80.

¹⁵ Φυλακὴ γὰρ καὶ καταδίκη εὐλόγως προσωνόμασται. ὡς καὶ αὐτὴν τὴν τοῦ χώρου θέαν μετανοίας πάσης καὶ πένθους ὑπάρχειν διδάσκαλον (Trevisan, *Scala paradisi*, 1:225; Luibheid and Russell, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, 127).

¹⁶ The actual location cannot be securely confirmed. In step four, Climacus makes brief mention of the Prison as a place not far from a coenobium in Alexandria: Perrone, “Prayer in Prison,” 247.

permission to go there, he arrives and describes being surrounded—as if by sculptures in a gallery—by men engaging in excruciating feats of penitence. Mourning their sinful past, some men bashed their breasts until they spat blood. Others were voluntarily bound with their hands tied behind their backs. Some monks stood outside all day and night, battling scalding heat and piercing cold. Their appearances and behaviors, recounts Climacus, made them appear no different from the possessed, from those standing trial for murder, from the living dead. Continuing through the nightmarish space, Climacus details how the prisoner-monks collectively wailed certain psalms and other pleadings to the Divine Judge. And toward the end of the passage, Climacus describes prisoners gathering around a monk about to find his release in death. They prod him, trying desperately to discover what the monk sees of the afterlife amidst his death throes. Another kind of ritual unfurls in this part of the ekphrasis. The prisoners philosophize and inquire, collectively, about the enigmas of death and divine judgment. And here, Climacus constructs an ekphrasis within the ekphrasis: he uses the monks' speculative speech to diagram post-mortem, unrevealed space in the terms of voids and obscure chambers. He concludes with this focus on death, vision, and the limits of knowledge, leaving his audience in suspense as to whether the holy prisoners ever found redemption.

This essay will first provide historical background for *The Heavenly Ladder*. It will introduce issues of authorship, composition, and how this text relates to earlier forms of writing associated with desert Christianity. Because no previous study has examined the Prison passages as an ekphrasis, the essay will then read parts of step five vis-à-vis earlier examples of the technique. In several respects, Climacus follows late antique textbook definitions of the mixed ekphrasis when conjuring places, times, events, and people “vividly before the eyes.”¹⁷ And throughout the ekphrasis, Climacus repeatedly makes his audience aware of his position as a witness or guide. Aggrandizing the holy

¹⁷ The definition found in Theon, *Progymnasmata* 118.6–120.11 (trans. in Webb, *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion*, 197–99); “Ἐκφρασίς ἐστι λόγος περιηγηματικὸς ἐνεργῶς ὑπ’ ὄψιν ἀγων τὸ δῆλον μενον. Webb traces Theon's influential definition from the first through fifth centuries: Webb, *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion*, 14. Also, M. Heath, “Theon and the History of the *Progymnasmata*,” *GRBS* 43.2 (2002/2003): 129–60.

criminals' feats, he follows another convention of ekphrasis by deploying terms of astonishment and wonder.

Climacus's application of ekphrasis to such a setting, indeed his self-conscious astonishment and suspended fascination, broke with convention. On the one hand, to heroize the self-destructive deeds of ascetics, to uphold their extreme devotion as exemplary was critical to early monastic mythmaking. Yet on the other hand, when compared to earlier accounts of asceticism by Theodoret of Cyrrhus or even Athanasius himself, Climacus's description is far more brutal. What compelled Climacus to go into such detail, and how do we account for the text's enhanced graphicness (*enargeia*)? Addressing these issues, this essay will then shift attention to Climacus's strategic use of violent vividness, for at the end of step five, Climacus says: “Let the holy prisoners, described above, be a rule for you, a pattern, a model, *a picture for repentance* [εἰκὼν πρὸς μετάνοιαν], so that for as long as you live you will have no need of a book [μὴ δεηθῆσθη βιβλίου].”¹⁸ Imprisonment, therefore, was not only a part of the text's content, but also an effect of its imagery. Like Homer's description of Achilles' shield, Climacus's ekphrasis constructs a microcosm within the text, albeit a microcosm with an oppressive, carceral space and time.¹⁹ And this microcosm was an apparatus. It was a space for the imagination, a memory prison with a structure so vivid that the monk could reenter it whenever he wanted to conjure penitential sensations.

The final part of this essay explores the various ways in which experiencing ekphrasis related to ritual practice, specifically the formation of the monk according to exemplary models. Those models were embodied by the spiritual warrior or sacred prisoner.²⁰ To attain those ideals of ascetic masculinity, to *become* such an image of repentance, required a few forms of participation in Climacus's memory prison. The first involved the act of reimagining, of revisiting, all its ghastly phantasms. This process itself constituted a painful monastic exercise with physical consequences, Climacus argues, that

¹⁸ “Ορος σοι, καὶ τύπος, καὶ ὑπογραμμὸς, καὶ εἰκὼν πρὸς μετάνοιαν ἔστωσαν οἱ προμνημονεύθεντες ἄγιοι κατάδικοι, καὶ οὐ μὴ δεηθῆσθη βιβλίου ὅλως ἐν τῇ ζωῇ σου πάσῃ (Trevisan, *Scala paradisi*, 1:241; Luibheid and Russell, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, 130 [italics mine]).

¹⁹ Elsner, “The Genres of Ekphrasis,” 4.

²⁰ On ekphrasis, images of suffering in earlier forms of Christian paideia (with recent bibliography): V. Marinis, “Asterius of Amaseia's *Ekphrasis on the Holy Martyr Euphemia*,” *JLA* 20.2 (2020): 285–307.

aided in the sinful body's reform.²¹ As we will examine, driving Climacus's theory of imagination was his belief in a sympathetic union between mind and body and a power of images to construct changes in that union. The second relationship between the ekphrasis and monastic formation relates more directly to the monastic *soma*, to its energy levels, even to its athletic drive. Through their deeds, he was, in fact, imparting certain instructions for physical acts of devotion. And thanks to recent archaeological findings, we can examine whether such practices were part of monastic reality or the result of rhetorical hyperbole—or a mixture of both.

The History of *The Heavenly Ladder*

The following section presents a brief history of *The Heavenly Ladder*, a text that has challenged readers for well over a millennium. While initially meant as a guide for monks pursuing greater ascetic withdrawal, the book quickly became something of a medieval best seller.²² By the eighth century, monks were already translating it from Greek to Syriac; by the fourteenth, translations had appeared in Georgian, Slavonic, Arabic, Armenian, Latin, Romanian, Spanish, Portuguese, and Ge'ez.²³ The text was a favorite among both the laity and aristocracy. The erudite Byzantine emperor Leo VI (866–912) composed scholia on the treatise.²⁴ Illustrated copies

21 Recently, Robin Cormack called attention to the lack of an extensive study of Byzantine memory of the sort found in surveys of the Latin West: R. Cormack, "Painter's Guides, Model-Books, Pattern-Books and Craftsman: or Memory and the Artist?" in *L'artista a Bisanzio e nel mondo cristiano-orientale*, ed. M. Bacci (Pisa, 2007), 11–29, esp. 28. On medieval memory and image making, see F. Yates, *The Art of Memory* (London, 2004), esp. 27–114; M. Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought: Mediation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images, 400–1200* (Cambridge, 2008); eadem, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1993). On ekphrasis, images of suffering in earlier forms of Christian paideia (with recent bibliography): Marinis, "Asterius of Amaseia's *Ekphrasis*," 285–307.

22 H. R. Johnsén, "Training for Solitude: John Climacus and the Art of Making a Ladder," *StP* 48 (2010): 159–64, at 164.

23 Zecher, *The Role of Death*, 7.

24 T. Antonopoulou, "Emperor Leo VI the Wise and the 'First Byzantine Humanism': On the Quest for Renovation and Cultural Synthesis," in *Autour du Premier humanisme byzantin & des Cinq études sur le XI^e siècle, quarante ans après Paul Lemerle*, ed. B. Flusin and J.-C. Cheynet (Paris, 2017), 187–233, at 193–94; and T. Antonopoulou, "Unpublished Scholia on the Apostle Paul and John Climacus by the Emperor Leo VI," in *Byzantinische Sprachkunst*:

of *The Heavenly Ladder* constitute some of the most resplendent examples of Middle Byzantine manuscript painting.²⁵ Even Ivan IV Vasilyevich, better known as Ivan the Terrible (1530–1584), had a copy.²⁶ And the influence of *The Heavenly Ladder* on Christian culture extended far beyond European soil. If we believe the Mexican Dominican bishop Agustín Dávila Padilla (1562–1604), *The Heavenly Ladder* was the first book distributed for novices in the Dominican monastery of Santa María Magdalena in Tepetlaotoc, thereby making it the first printed book in the New World.²⁷ In the nineteenth century, the Danish existentialist Søren Kierkegaard wrote his *Philosophical Fragments* under the pseudonym Johannes Climacus.²⁸ And in the early twentieth century, the text so fascinated the Zurich Dadaist Hugo Ball that he devoted an entire chapter to Climacus in his 1923 study of Byzantine saints.²⁹

Studien zur byzantinischen Literatur gewidmet Wolfram Hörandner zum 65. Geburtstag, Byzantinisches Archiv 20, ed. M. Hinterberger and E. Schiffer (Berlin, 2007), 20–34, at 31–33.

25 B. Pentcheva, "The Aesthetics of Landscape and Icon at Sinai," *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 65/66 (2014/2015): 194–211; N. P. Ševčenko, "Monastic Challenges: Some Manuscripts of the *Heavenly Ladder*," in *Byzantine Art: Recent Studies*, ed. C. Hourihane (Tempe, 2009), 39–62; K. Corrigan, "Constantine's Problems: The Making of *The Heavenly Ladder* of John Climacus, Vat.gr. 394," *Word & Image* 12.1 (1996): 61–93; earlier, J. R. Martin, *The Illustration of the Heavenly Ladder of John Climacus* (Princeton, 1954).

26 Chryssavgis, *John Climacus*, 236; Zecher, *The Role of Death*, 8.

27 F. A. Fernández, *Historia eclesiastica de nuestros tiempos, que es compendio de los excelentes frutos que en ellos el estado eclesiástico y sagradas Religiones han hecho y hazen, en la conversión de idolatrías y reducción de herejes* (Toledo, 1611), 122. Other early modern sources claiming Climacus's to be the first printed book: G. González Dávila, *Teatro eclesiástico de la primitiva iglesia de las Indias occidentales*, vol. 1 (Madrid, 1649), 23; F. B. de Medina, *Crónica de la Provincia de San Diego de México* (Mexico City, 1682), 233. And later, J. G. Icazbalceta, *Bibliografía mexicana del siglo XVI, Primera Parte: Catálogo razonado de libros impresos de 1539 á 1600* (Mexico City, 1886), xv–xvii. I am immensely grateful to Jonathan Zecher for helping me locate the transmission of *The Heavenly Ladder* in New Spain. On the likelihood of Esteban Martín (as opposed to Juan Pablos) being the first printer there, see A. B. Carver, "Esteban Martín, the First Printer in the Western Hemisphere: An Examination of Documents and Opinion," *Library Quarterly* 39 (1969): 344–52; E. Sandal, "L'Introduzione della Stampa nel Nuovo Mondo, 1539 e 1584," *Aevum* 79.3 (2005): 639–75.

28 C. D. L. Johnson, "'The Silent Tone of the Eternal': Søren Kierkegaard and John Climacus on Silence," *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 19.2 (2019): 199–216.

29 H. Ball, *Byzantinisches Christentum: Drei Heiligenleben* (Munich, 1923), 1–60.

Facts of the author's life are notoriously difficult to secure.³⁰ Climacus composed the book in the rugged Sinai while serving as abbot of the Vatos Monastery, a place now known as the Monastery of Saint Catherine.³¹ The book came about at the behest of another abbot, also named John, of the nearby monastery at Raithou on the Gulf of Suaz. John of Raithou's request drew on Sinai's reputation as the place of divinely revealed wisdom. He asked that Climacus, having ascended the heights like Moses, provide the pure monastic path with divinely illuminated authority.³² Certain tenth- and eleventh-century manuscripts from Constantinople and Sinai even transmit *The Heavenly Ladder* under the name *Spiritual Tablets* (*Πλάκες πνευματικαί*), reflecting the Sinaitic and Mosaic connection.³³ As though a hierophant, Climacus disclosed aspects of an ascetic tradition that were by then about three centuries old.³⁴

Excellent recent scholarship has overturned prejudices about the treatise's opacity, allowing us to approach it vis-à-vis ancient rhetorical paradigms, even

30 For a recent summary of this issue: Zecher, *The Role of Death*, 29–34.

31 U. Dahari, *Monastic Settlements in South Sinai in the Byzantine Period: The Archaeological Remains*, IAA Reports 9 (Jerusalem, 2000), 55–64; R. S. Nelson, "Sinai Studies: An Overview and an Introduction," in *Approaching the Holy Mountain: Art and Liturgy at St. Catherine's Monastery in the Sinai*, ed. S. E. J. Gerstel and R. S. Nelson (Turnhout, 2010), 1–14.

32 Εἰτα, ἀγάμενοι πάντες τὰ πάντα αὐτοῦ ἐν ἀπασι κατορθώματα, ὡς νεοφανῆ τινα Μωϋσέα, βίᾳ ἐπὶ τὴν τῶν ἀδελφῶν ἥφεμοιν ἀνεβίβασαν ἐπὶ τῆς ἀρχικῆς λυχνίας τὸν λύχνον . . . ἀλλὰ καὶ προσπελάζει τῷ ὅρει καὶ αὐτός. καὶ τὸν ἀδυτὸν ὑπελθὼν γνόσφον, τὴν θεοτύπωτον δέχεται, νοεραῖς ἀναβιβαζόμενος βαθμίσι, νομοθεσταν καὶ θεωρεῖν. Λόγῳ θεοῦ ἀνοίγει τὸ στόμα, καὶ τὸ πνεῦμα εἰλκυσε, καὶ ἔξηρεύετο λόγον, καὶ λόγους ἐξ ἀγαθοῦ θησαυροῦ τῆς καρδίας (Trevisan, *Scala paradisi*, "Introduzione," 17). For analysis of the Mosaic precedent and authorship, see Duffy, "Embellishing the Steps," 2.

33 The other titles in the tenth- and eleventh-century manuscripts are Κλίμαξ θείας ἀνόδου (The Ladder of Divine Ascent), Πλάκες πνευματικαί (Spiritual tablets), and Λόγος ἀσκητικός (Ascetic discourse). On the issue of titles, see Duffy, "Embellishing the Steps," 5. For the early Sinai manuscripts, V. Gardthausen, *Catalogus codicum graecorum Sinaiticorum* (Oxford, 1886), 100–101. On Sinai and the tradition of the *Spiritual Tablets*, H. Kessler, *Spiritual Seeing: Picturing God's Invisibility in Medieval Art* (Philadelphia, 2000), 29–52.

34 As Peter Brown concludes his survey of desert Christianity, "John wrote with three centuries of spiritual wisdom behind him" (*The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* [New York, 2008], 240).

late antique poetic style.³⁵ Climacus may never have heard of rhetoricians like Aphthonios, but he had spent some time in Alexandria, where its famed *didaskaleion* certainly kept the ancient art of rhetoric alive.³⁶ We also know he went to the Vatos Monastery at sixteen, a time by which he would have encountered *Progymnasmata* had he followed conventional school training.³⁷ Later writers celebrated the rhetorical nature of the text. Subsequent manuscripts even give Climacus the title of *scholastikos*, an epithet signifying high education, even rhetorical expertise.³⁸ Henrik Rydell Johnsén convincingly proved how Climacus's elliptical style was not the result of randomness or haste, but rather a reflection of the embellishment and asyndeton associated with the late antique Jeweled Style.³⁹ Johnsén also uncovered how, underneath Climacus's seemingly disjointed paragraph structure, the fourfold pattern of rhetorical composition (*prooimion, prosthesis, pistis, and epilogos*) appears and sometimes the eightfold pattern (*ergasia*).⁴⁰ These compositional structures were transmitted in Greek via the second-century *Progymnasmata* attributed to Hermogenes of Tarsus.⁴¹ Climacus's construction of proof and propositions also reflects familiarity with rhetorical stasis theory and other ideals of sound rhetoric, namely dignity (*semenotes*), complexity (*peribole*), sincerity (*althea*), and ability (*denotes*).⁴² In crafting his ekphrasis, Climacus leads the audience around (*periegesis*) as well as speaks in character (*ethopoeia*). He

35 Duffy, "Embellishing the Steps," 9–17; Johnsén, *Reading John Climacus*, 163–82.

36 On late antique accounts of educational centers in Egypt, see A. Westergren, "Paideia, Piety, and Power: Emperors and Monks in Socrates' *Church History*," in *Monastic Education in Late Antiquity: The Transformation of Classical Paideia*, ed. L. I. Larsen and S. Rubenson (Cambridge, 2018), 53–72, esp. 55. On the Alexandrian rhetorical schools and the dissemination of rhetorical handbooks: Heath, "Theon and the History of the *Progymnasmata*," 138–58.

37 Zecher, *The Role of Death*, 30.

38 On the significance, see Johnsén, *Reading John Climacus*, 7–9; Torrance, "Scaling the Text," 795.

39 Johnsén, *Reading John Climacus*, 183–95; M. Roberts, *The Jeweled Style: Poetry and Poetics in Late Antiquity* (Ithaca, NY, 1988).

40 Johnsén, *Reading John Climacus*, 30–122; see also L. I. Larsen, "Ørkenfedrenes Apophthegmata og den klassiske Retoriske Tradition," in *Meddelanden från Collegium Patristicum Lundense* 16 (2001): 26–37.

41 A. N. Stavelas, "Oratorical Stylistics According to Hermogenes of Tarsus," *Aither: Journal for the Study of Greek and Latin Philosophical Traditions* 3 (2004): 6–21.

42 Johnsén, *Reading John Climacus*, 89.

also imbues the speech with a mesmerizing vividness (*enargeia*) in order to affect his listener's imagination (*phantasia*).

Like steps, *The Heavenly Ladder* is comprised of brief sections (*logoi*). Some focus on mastering vices like anger, malice, slander, falsehood, or despondency. Others concern gluttony and lust. The final sections muse on higher virtues like simplicity, humility, discernment, and stillness. Certain scholars identify a compositional diptych divided between practice (*praktike*) and contemplation (*theoria*), between practical and intellectual virtues.⁴³ Others see the progression of the text as tripartite with three stages of ascetic progress revolving around the cultivation of repentance, mourning, and humility.⁴⁴ Regardless of how the rungs fit together, the ladder reached a summit. By the end, the monk has attained an illuminated, weightless state of *apatheia* and a loving fusion with the divine.⁴⁵ A sense of enamored "inebriation," "purity," and "illumination" awaits, in addition to a "resemblance to God, insofar this [is] humanly possible . . . a fountain of faith, an abyss of patience, a sea of humility."⁴⁶

The Heavenly Ladder is neither a series of exegetical glosses nor a form of visionary literature. The book teaches through definitions, reflections, warnings, and vivid anecdotes in a way clearly indebted to precedents of desert literature. Climacus's gnomic and even cryptic passages resemble the tradition of the *Apophthegmata Patrum* or *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* associated with the early monastic cells of Scetis and Nitria in Upper Egypt. *The Heavenly Ladder* also reflects knowledge of the classical sources of Christian Stoicism. Evagrius, some

43 Zecher, *The Role of Death*, 45.

44 On the possible Evagrian precedents for the three stages, see K. Ware, "Introduction," in Luibheid and Russell, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, 58–68; Zecher, *The Role of Death*, 37–51.

45 On apatheia as an embodied experience, P. Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, ed. A. I. Davidson, trans. Michael Chase (Oxford, 1995), 126–40.

46 Ἀγάπη, κατὰ μὲν ποιότητα, ὅμοιωσις Θεοῦ, καθ' ὅσον βροτοίς ἐφικτόν. κατὰ δὲ ἐνέργειαν, μέθη ψυχῆς. κατὰ δὲ τὴν ιδιότητα, πηγὴ πίστεως, ἀβυσσὸς μακροθυμίας, θάλασσα ταπεινώσεως (Trevisan, *Scala paradisi*, 2:307; Luibheid and Russell, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, 286). A similar goal of finding a resemblance to God is found in Plato's definition of philosophy already in *Theaetetus* 176b1; Gregory of Nyssa, Proclus, and John of Damascus, for example, all repeat the definition. For a recent discussion of this concept, see A. M. Roberts, "Framing a Middle Byzantine Alchemical Codex," *DOP* 73 (2019): 69–102, esp. 72–74.

fathers of Gaza such as Abba Isaiah, John, Dorotheus, and Barsanuphius, and the example of Anthony's life as told by Athanasius, all shaped Climacus's guide.⁴⁷ As Jonathan Zecher has so thoroughly examined, Climacus drew his understanding of the sinful passions or demonic thoughts by engaging, or "conversing," with the Greek epitomes of John Cassian as well as those of Gregory of Nazianzus.⁴⁸

The infernal rhetoric in the ekphrasis served to support another of Climacus's theological positions, one that he expressed in mordant terms in the closing lines of step five. "All of us," says Climacus, "but especially the lapsed—should be especially careful not to be afflicted with the disease of the godless Origen. This defiled [ἡ μιαρὰ] disease uses God's love for man as an excuse and is very welcome to those who are lovers of pleasure [τοῖς φιληδόνοις]."⁴⁹ That "godless Origen" is, of course, the Egyptian Christian theologian Origen of Alexandria (ca. 184–ca. 253). Origen's disciples sought a different form of divine illumination, a more disembodied experience of scripture. Peter Brown once framed their exegetical activity as akin to an elite, urban reading group.⁵⁰ Furthermore, Climacus's statements may reflect the Second Origenist Controversy (ca. 531–553) in the prior century that eventually led to Justinian's anti-Origenism edict of 543.⁵¹ The Second Ecumenical Council at Constantinople subsequently issued an

47 For an introduction, see Zecher, *The Role of Death*, 15–18, 26–28. The gnomic sayings derived from the tradition of *apophthegmata* constitutes rhetorical κρίσις or "argument by authority": H. R. Johnsén, "Rhetoric and Ascetic Ascent in *The Ladder* of John Climacus," *StP* 39 (2006): 393–98, at 395. On *anachroensis* and ascetic mythmaking, see J. Goehring, "The Encroaching Desert: Literary Production and Ascetic Space in Early Christian Egypt," *JEChrSt* 1.3 (1993): 281–96. On Anthony in late antique paideia more broadly, P. Gemeinhardt, "Translating *Paideia*: Education in the Greek and Latin Versions of the *Life of Antony*," in *Monastic Education in Late Antiquity*, ed. Larsen and Rubenson, 33–52.

48 J. Zecher, "The Reception of Evagrian Psychology in the *Ladder of Divine Ascent*: John Cassian and Gregory Nazianzen as Sources and Conversation Partners," *JTS* 69.2 (2018): 674–713.

49 Πρόστιχωμεν πάντες, ἐπὶ πλειῶ δὲ οἱ πεπτωκόντες, μὴ νοῆσαι ἐν καρδίᾳ τὴν τοῦ Ὁριγένους τοῦ ἀθέου νόσον. τὴν γὰρ Θεοῦ φιλανθρωπίαν, ἡ μιαρὰ προβαλλομένη, εὐπαράδεκτος ἐν τοῖς φιληδόνοις γίνεται (Trevisan, *Scala paradisi*, 1:241; Luibheid and Russell, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, 131).

50 Brown, *The Body and Society*, 229.

51 D. Hombergen, *The Second Origenist Controversy: A New Perspective on Cyril of Scythopolis' Monastic Biographies as Historical Sources for Sixth-Century Origenism* (Rome, 2001).

anathema against Origen in 553. When Climacus calls Origen's followers "lovers of pleasure," he surely is referencing strands of Origenist thought regarding the role of theoria in monastic life. Controversy, therefore, must have remained in Climacus's time regarding the role of contemplation vis-à-vis physical expressions of devotion.⁵²

Climacus is also positioning his polemic against Origen's teachings on providence and divine judgment.⁵³ Contentions against Origen's eschatology are summarized in the eleventh anathema against him in the Fifth Ecumenical Council of 553: "If anyone says that the coming judgment means the total destruction of bodies and that the end of the story will be an immaterial nature, and that thereafter nothing that is material will exist but only pure mind, let him be anathema."⁵⁴ As we will confront, Climacus, by contrast, insistently imagines Christ as an irascible judge. He provides descriptions of hell as spatially and materially constituted. His ekphrasis itself starkly opposes Origen's conception of providence through its construction of suspense and postmortem indeterminacy. Thus, against this image of the languid Christian intellectual assured by divine forgiveness, Climacus intensified the ideal monk's masculine physicality.⁵⁵ Clearly, the treatise was not purporting to guide the monastic existence of Trinitarian contemplation in a fragrant cloister; its initiate trained for a contest far more rugged and embodied, something more akin to spiritual martial arts. Throughout, Climacus calls the ideal monk a soldier, an athlete, a wrestler, a laborer, a runner, and, as we will find, even a criminal.

The arrival of *The Heavenly Ladder* in the seventh century attests to the survival of such romanticizing portrayals of ascetic endurance. After all, the framing of asceticism in the terms of combat, danger, warfare, and demonic confrontation was essential to

⁵² See the excellent summary in D. J. Mezynski, "The Effects of the Origenist Controversy on the Pastoral Theology of Barsanuphius and John" (PhD diss., Fordham University, 2012), 53–61.

⁵³ P. Tzamalikos, *Origen: Philosophy of History and Eschatology* (Leiden, 2007).

⁵⁴ R. Price, *The Acts of the Council of Constantinople 553*, vol. 2 (Liverpool, 2009), 285.

⁵⁵ On education levels and spiritual ideals, see H. R. Johnsén, "The Virtue of Being Uneducated: Attitudes towards Classical *Paideia* in Early Monasticism and Ancient Philosophy," in *Monastic Education in Late Antiquity*, ed. Larsen and Rubenson, 219–36.

the creation of Christian monasticism from the beginning.⁵⁶ Drawing on Upper Egyptian writing ranging from Athanasius and Pachomius to Shenoute of Atri, Darlene Brooks Hedstrom recently argued that "by drawing on Classical and Hellenistic athletic imagery, monastic authors effectively replaced the gladiatorial arenas with desert arenas."⁵⁷ Already in the treatise's opening, Climacus states: "Struggle [βίας] and endless pain are the lot of those who aim to ascend to heaven with the body. . . . It is hard, truly hard."⁵⁸ Climacus also praises ascetic fortitude by comparing the monk to another violent archetype; in *The Heavenly Ladder*'s fourth section, "Obedience," Climacus frames the ascetic initiate as "marching in the army of the First Martyr."⁵⁹ The fantastic image of an overtly militant character, "Christ's soldier," was another familiar means of inciting zeal. It supported what Katherine A. Smith identified as an "ideological shift" that transferred the ideal of literal, physical martyrdom to the monastic life in late antiquity.⁶⁰ In the first section of *The Heavenly Ladder*, which is devoted to renouncing the world (Περὶ ἀποταγῆς βίου), Climacus even conjures the image of Anthony's first steps to the fringes of his village in Faiyum, which likely occurred after 270: "The man turning away from the world in order to shake off the burden of his sins should imitate those who sit by the tombs outside the city."⁶¹

⁵⁶ D. Brakke, *Demons and the Making of the Monk: Spiritual Combat in Early Christianity* (Cambridge, MA, 2006), esp. 3–48, 127–56.

⁵⁷ D. Brooks Hedstrom, *The Monastic Landscape of Late Antique Egypt: An Archaeological Reconstruction* (Cambridge, 2017), 179. On Athanasius and the production of masculine gender, V. Burrus, "Begotten, Not Made": *Conceiving Manhood in Late Antiquity* (Stanford, 2000), 69–79.

⁵⁸ Βίας ἀληθῶς καὶ ἀπαύστων ὁ δύνων οἱ εἰς οὐρανὸν μετὰ σώματος ἀνελθεῖν ἐπιχειρήσαντες δέονται καὶ μάλιστα ἐν προοιμίοις αὐτοῖς τῆς ἀποταγῆς (Trevisan, *Scala paradisi*, 1:51; Luibheid and Russell, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, 75).

⁵⁹ Luibheid and Russell, trans., *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, 109.

⁶⁰ K. A. Smith, *War and the Making of Medieval Monastic Culture*, Studies in the History of Medieval Religion 37 (Rochester, 2011), 79.

⁶¹ Μιμείσθω ὁ τὸ ἔαυτοῦ φορτίον τῶν ἀμαρτημάτων σκορπίσαι τοῦ κόσμου ἐξεληλυθώς, τοὺς πρὸ τάφων καθημένους, ἔξω τῆς πόλεως (Trevisan, *Scala paradisi*, 1:49; Luibheid and Russell, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, 75). On living in tombs in this portion of Anthony's life, see Athanasius, *Vita Antonii* 8 (PG 26:854C); D. Kyrtatas, "Living in Tombs: The Secret of an Early Christian Mystical Experience," in *Mystery and Secrecy in the Nag Hammadi Collection and Other Ancient Literature: Ideas and Practices; Studies for Einar Thomassen at Sixty*, ed. C. H. Bull, L. I. Lied, and J. Turner (Boston, 2012), 245–57. The

In addition to Anthony's example, Theodoret of Cyrrhus's *A History of the Monks of Syria* also reflects this ideological shift.⁶² Theodoret's biographies provide extended details of ascetic isolation, starvation, dehydration, wearing iron, and battling environmental extremes. For example, Theodoret recounts the life of Eusebius of Teledia, a village east of Antioch. The ascetic immured himself in a windowless cell, speaking to no one.⁶³ To keep ascetic focus, Eusebius "bound his waist with an iron belt and attached a very heavy collar to his neck and then used a further chain to connect the belt to the collar, so that bent down in this way he would be forced uninterruptedly to stoop to the ground."⁶⁴ Similar stories abound in Theodoret's *History*, such as one devoted to the appearance of a monk named Eusebius of Asikha, who "endured the hardships of the open air."⁶⁵ At one point, Theodoret writes:

When he reached extreme old age, such that he lost most of his teeth, he changed neither his food nor his lodging. Frozen in winter and burnt in summer, he bore with endurance the contrasting temperatures of the air, his face shriveled up and all the limbs of his body wasted away.⁶⁶

Although Theodoret achieves a vivid description, the text is not a complex ekphrasis. Furthermore, at the very beginning of his collection, Theodoret is clear about his intentions to write history: "The account will proceed in narrative form, not following the rules of panegyric

literature on Anthony and Athanasius is immense. For Anthony and the politics of space, see D. Brakke, "Outside the Places, Within the Truth": Athanasius of Alexandria and the Localization of the Holy," in *Pilgrimage and Holy Space in Late Antique Egypt*, ed. D. Frankfurter (Leiden, 1998), 445–82; N. Kelsey, "The Body as Desert in the *Life of St. Anthony*," *Semeia* 57 (1992): 131–51; B. R. Brennan, "Dating Athanasius' *Vita Antonii*," *VChr* 30.1 (1976): 52–54.

⁶² C. L. de Wet, "The Discipline of Domination: Asceticism, Violence, and Monastic Curses in Theodoret's *Historia Religiosa*," in *Religious Violence in the Ancient World: From Classical Athens to Late Antiquity*, ed. J. H. F. Dijkstra and C. R. Raschle (Cambridge, 2020), 323–44.

⁶³ Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *A History of the Monks of Syria* (R. Price, trans., *A History of the Monks of Syria by Theodoret of Cyrrhus* [Kalamazoo, 1985], 50).

⁶⁴ Theodoret, *A History* (Price, trans., *A History*, 52).

⁶⁵ Theodoret, *A History* (Price, trans., *A History*, 126).

⁶⁶ Theodoret, *A History* (Price, trans., *A History*, 126–127).

but forming a plain tale of some few facts."⁶⁷ More differences exist between Theodoret and Climacus, foremost being Climacus's insistent responses of disbelief and wonder at the sight of the prisoners. Furthermore, Climacus neither names individual ascetics in step five nor constructs a narrative. The ekphrasis moves like a journey, thereby forming a microcosm within the text.

Entering the Prison

We now turn to the Prison passages. At the beginning of step five, Climacus is reflexive about his aspiration to vivid descriptions as well as his transfixed gaze. He places the prison within a frame, indeed, at a distance suitable for aesthetic observation. In this way, Climacus's prooimon resembles how encomia for ancient cities and buildings introduce their spectacles.⁶⁸ However, with the term ξένος, he confers upon the prison an aura of the foreign and the strange:

I, the weakling, heard that there was a great and foreign [ξένην] way of life and humility for those living in a separate monastery called "The Prison." . . . I went therefore to that abode of penitents, to that place of true mourning, and if I may be so bold as to say so, I actually saw what the eye of an inattentive man never saw, what the ear of a lackadaisical man never heard, what never entered the heart of a sluggard. I saw things done and said that could only draw down the mercy of God, deeds and attitudes of the body that quickly win His love for men.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Theodoret, *A History* (Price, trans., *A History*, 7).

⁶⁸ An important example is Libanius, *Antiochios*, Oration 11.245; see G. Downey, trans., "Libanius' Oration in Praise of Antioch (Oration XI)," *PAPS* 103.5 (1959): 652–86. See also Webb, "Aesthetics of Sacred Space," 65; H. Saradi, "The *Kallos* of the Byzantine City: The Development of a Rhetorical *Topos* and Historical Reality," *Gesta* 34.1 (1995): 37–56.

⁶⁹ Άκουσας ἐγώ δ ἀσθενής μεγάλην τινὰ καὶ ξένην είναι τὴν κατάστασιν καὶ τὴν ταπείνωσιν, τῶν ἐν τῇ μονῇ τῇ ιδιαζόσῃ, τῇ λεγομένῃ φυλακῇ. . . Παραγενόμενος οὖν ἐγώ ἐπὶ τῇ τῶν μετανοούντων μονῇ, καὶ ὅντως πενθούντων χώρᾳ ἔωρακα ἀληφῶς (εἰ μὴ τολμηρὸν εἰπεῖν) ἡ ὁς ἔτυχεν ὄφθαλμός ἀνθρώπου ἀμελοῦς οὐκ εἶδε, καὶ οὖς ῥάθυμον οὐ δέχεται, καὶ ἐπὶ καρδίαν ὀκνηροῦ οὐκ ἀνέβη, πράγματα καὶ ῥήματα τὸν θεόν δυνάμενα βιάσασθαι, ἐπιτηδεύματά τε καὶ σχῆματα τὴν αὐτοῦ φιλανθρωπίαν συντόμως κατακάμπτοντα (Trevisan, *Scala paradisi*, 1:207; Luibheid and Russell, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, 122 [with my modifications]).

Here, Climacus exposes the challenges and limitations of descriptive language itself. To capture the totality of the prison experience requires him to describe not only a place but also its people and their deeds, their times and rituals; each is a category within the *Progymnasmata*'s definition for a mixed ekphrasis (μικτὴ ἔκφρασις).⁷⁰

The introduction contains another strategy for building up the prison as astonishing and wonderous. With the term "actually" (ἀληθῶς), Climacus aggrandizes the space by setting up expectations of disbelief. It is the first example of what will become a recurring rhetorical gesture. For example, at the close of the ekphrasis when Climacus breaks the description and details his return to the main monastery, the hieromonk asks him, "So, Father John . . . you saw how those men were struggling?" To this, Climacus responds, "I saw them, Father, and I was amazed [τεθαύμακα]."⁷¹ Here, Climacus again uses the term *thauma* for astonishment.⁷² Later he repeats, again, words of disbelief and amazement: "Now I know well, my friends, that these labors I have described [will seem] unbelievable [ἄπιστα] to some."⁷³ In one sense, a speaker's claim to credibility as a guide has earlier precedent in Second Sophistic descriptions of places, such as the tour of Athens by Aelius Aristides.⁷⁴ But the effect of foregrounding disbelief is also found in better-known ekphrases, when, for example, Paul the Silentary describes his bewilderment in the face of Hagia Sophia's interior: "Return, my song,

to behold a wonder scarcely to be believed when seen or heard."⁷⁵

When Climacus takes the audience to "that abode," he structures his account according to a common technique in the ekphrases of places called periegesis. To describe sacred spaces, late antique Christian orators used periegesis to give shape to an otherwise overwhelming, unyielding spectacle.⁷⁶ From λόγος περιηγηματικός, periegesis is a "speech that leads one around."⁷⁷ Periegesis unfolds details within a discourse by taking a route different from the linearity of *diegesis* ("leading through"), the straightforward presentation of narration.⁷⁸ A later Byzantine commentary attributed to Aphthonios of Sardis says, "The speech which relates everything in order, relating both the action and the person and showing in detail, is called *periēgēmatikos*.⁷⁹ Although predating Aphthonios's definition, Climacus not only details the action but also references his own position to remind the audience of his status as guide. And like other examples of periegesis, he does not offer a sense of entrance or even a guided exit. He starts his ekphrasis outside, looking at various penitential feats with no clear sense of orientation other than a sensation of being surrounded: "I saw some of those accused yet innocent men stand all night until dawn in the open air, their feet never moving, pitifully pounded by the natural urge to sleep, giving themselves no rest, reproaching themselves, driving sleep away with abuse and insults."⁸⁰ Only at the end does Climacus actually mention the monastic enclosure:

70 Theon's *Progymnasmata* defines mixed ekphrasis in relation to "the night battle in Thucydides; for night is a portion of time and the battle is an action": Γένοιτο δ' ἀν τις καὶ μικτὴ ἔκφρασις, ὡς παρὰ Θουκυδίῃ καὶ Φλίστῳ νυκτουμαχίᾳ. ή μὲν γὰρ νὺξ καρός τις, η δὲ μάχη πρᾶξις (Theon, *Progymnasmata* [Webb, trans., *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion*, 198]).

71 "Τί ἐστι, Πάτερ Ἰωάννη; Εώρακας τοὺς τῶν καμνόντων ἄθλους;" Ἐγὼ δὲ ἔφην. "Καὶ ἐώρακα, Πάτερ, καὶ τεθαύμακα" (Trevisan, *Scala paradisi*, 1:229; Luibheid and Russell, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, 128).

72 On wonder and the spectacle of violence in earlier Roman contexts, see C. Frilingos, "'It Moves Me to Wonder': Narrating Violence and Religion under the Roman Empire," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 77. 4 (2009): 825–52. On later medieval uses, C. W. Bynum, "Wonder," *AHR* 102.1 (1997): 1–26; L. Dalston and K. Park, *Wonder and the Order of Nature* (New York, 2001).

73 Οὐκ ἀγνοῶ δὲ ἐγώ, διθανμάσιοι, ὅτι τοῖσιν μὲν ἄπιστα . . . (Trevisan, *Scala paradisi*, 1:233; Luibheid and Russell, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, 129).

74 Saradi, "The *Kallos* of the Byzantine City," 38.

75 Paulus Silentarius, "Descr. S. Sophiae" (C. Mango, trans., *The Art of the Byzantine Empire, 312–1453: Sources and Documents* [Toronto, 1986], 82).

76 Webb, "Aesthetics of Sacred Space," 65.

77 On the distinction, Webb, *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion*, 65–66.

78 Webb, *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion*, 54–55.

79 Aphthonios, *Progymnasmata* (Webb, trans., *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion*, 206): μεταφορικῶς δὲν καὶ διλόγος ὁ πάντα ἔξις καὶ τὰ τοῦ πράγματος καὶ τὰ τοῦ προσώπου ἀφηγούμενος <καὶ> ἀκριβείας δεικνύς περιηγηματικὸς δύομαζεται.

80 Τόὺς μὲν τῶν ὑπευθύνων ἔκεινων τῶν ἀνευθύνων παννυχί, μέχρι πρωῖας ισταμένους αἰθρίους, τοὺς πόδας ἀκινήτους ἔκοντας, καὶ τῷ ὕπνῳ ἐλεεινῷς κατακλονουμένους τῇ βίᾳ ταύτης τῆς φύσεως, καὶ μηδεμιαν ἀνάπαυσιν ἀντοῖς χαριζομένους, ἀλλ' ἔαυτους ἐπιπλήσσοντας καὶ ἀτιμαῖς καὶ ὑβρεῖς διωπλήζοντας (Trevisan, *Scala paradisi*, 1:209; Luibheid and Russell, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, 122 [with my modifications]).

I came close to despair when I had seen and heard all this among them and when I had compared my own indifference with what they went through. What a dreadful place they lived in! It was dark, stinking, filthy, and squalid. To call it a prison or house of convicts was an accurate description. Just the sight of it would teach you penitence and mourning.⁸¹

Here Climacus fully achieves the goal of Christian architectural ekphrasis. Physical space serves as the material manifestation of an invisible ideal, in this case, the ideals of “penitence and mourning.” The first word in the final sentence is “Φυλακή” and the last one, “διδάσκαλον,” and through such construction, John compares carceral space to didactic space. Furthermore, this passage engages several senses from smell to sight. There is an absence of order, an absence of light, even an absence of life itself. Filth and stench conjure impressions of material decay. As we will find, this deteriorating matter and space will become consecrated, paradoxically, as extensions of the prisoners’ desperate ritual pleadings for the Judge’s pardon.

As the ekphrasis proceeds, Climacus gives, rapidly and rigorously, more visual details as he moves through the space and finally encounters the holy convicts:

Others sat in sackcloth and ashes on the ground, hiding their faces between their knees, striking the earth with their foreheads. Others constantly beat their breasts, recalling their past lives and the condition of their souls. Some shed their tears on the ground, while others, unable to weep, struck themselves. Some raised over their own souls a lament for the dead, since the strength to bear their hearts’ grief had left them. Others moaned inwardly, stifling the sounds of their wailing until, unable to bear it any longer, they would suddenly cry out. I saw men who in look and disposition seemed out of their minds,

⁸¹ Ἐγὼ δὲ ταῦτα ἔωρακώς τε παρ' ἐκείνοις καὶ ἀκηκοώς, μικρούς δεῖν ἔαντοῦ ἀπογινώσκειν ἔμελλον, ὅρῶν τὴν ἔαντοῦ ἀδιαφορίαν, καὶ συγκρίνων ταύτην πρὸς τὴν ἐκείνων κακοπάθειαν. Οἴα γὰρ ἦν καὶ αὐτὴ ἡ τοῦ τόπου κατάστασις καὶ κατοίκησις. ὅλη σκοτεινὴ, ὅλη δυσώδης, ὅλη ρυπώσα καὶ αὐχμηρά. Φυλακή γάρ καὶ καταδίκη εὐλόγως προσωνόμασται. ὡς καὶ αὐτὴν τὴν τοῦ χώρου θέαν μετανοίας πάσης καὶ πένθους ὑπάρχειν διδάσκαλον (Trevisan, *Scala paradisi*, 1:225; Luibheid and Russell, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, 127).

made dumb by the complete darkness of their despair, insensible to the life around them, their minds sunk in the depths of humility, their eyes’ tears dried up in the fire of despondency.⁸²

This passage combines two types of ekphrasis found in the *Progymnasmata*. The strange prostrations, the performances of self-harm, and the contorted expressions constitute *pragmata*, or actions.⁸³ And if we strip away its religious significance entirely, the violence as well as the grievous reactions could describe the anguish of a conquered people, another point of focus within battle ekphrasis. Hermogenes said in the *Progymnasmata* that, in an ekphrasis of war, following “the slaughter, the deaths” (*τὰς σφαγάς, τὸν θανάτους*), one ought to focus on “the others’ tears and slavery” (*τῶν δὲ τὰ δάκρυα, τὴν δουλείαν*).⁸⁴

But Climacus goes far beyond merely describing bondage. His language here reflects a knowledge of how invisible despondency (*ἡ ἀθυμία*) could manifest in febrility and interminable exhaustion, that is, visible symptoms. In this respect, Climacus’s discourse resembles another example of ekphrasis regarding pragmata, such as Libanius’s description of “drunkenness” (*μεθῆς*).⁸⁵ Libanius says that wine “in moderation” (*μετρίως*) is beneficial to “body and does not harm his soul” (*τό τε*

⁸² Ἀλλους ἐν τῷ ἐδάφει ἐπὶ σάκκου καὶ σποδοῦ καθημένους, καὶ τὸ πρόσωπον τοῖς γόνασι καλύπτοντας, καὶ τὸ μέτωπον εἰς γῆν τύπτοντας.—έτερους τὸ στῆθος διὰ παντὸς τύπτοντας, καὶ τὴν ἔαντων ψυχὴν καὶ ζῷην ἀνακαλούμενους. Οἱ μὲν ἐν ἐκείνοις τὸ ἐδάφος, τοῖς δάκρυσιν ἔβρεχον. οἱ δέ, δακρύων ἀποροῦντες, ἔαυτοὺς κατέκοπτον. Οἱ μέν, ὡς ἐπὶ ταῖς ἔαντων ψυχαῖς ὠλδαλύζον, τὴν συνοχὴν τῆς καρδίας φέρει μὴ ἰσχύοντες. οἱ δέ τῇ καρδίᾳ ἔβρυχον, καὶ τῷ στόματι τὸν τοῦ ὀδυρμοῦ ψόφον διεκάλυνον. “Εστι δὲ ὅτε μηκέτι κρατεῖν ἰσχύοντες, αἰφνιδίως ἀνέκραζον.—Εἰδον ἐγὼ ἐκεῖ τινας ὥσπερ ἔαυτῶν ἐξεστεκότας τῷ ἥθει καὶ τῇ συννοίᾳ, ἐννοεύς τινας τῇ πολλῇ ἀδημονίᾳ γεγονόντας ὅλους ἐσκοτισμένους, καὶ ὥσπερ ἀναισθήτους πρὸς πάντα τὰ τοῦ βίου τυγχάνοντας, τῷ νοῦ λοιπόν ἐν τῇ ἀβύσσῳ τῆς ταπεινώσεως καταδύσαντας, καὶ τῷ πυρὶ τῆς ἀθυμίας τὰ τῶν ὄφθαλμῶν δάκρυα ἀποτηγανίσαντας (Trevisan, *Scala paradisi*, 1:209–11; Luibheid and Russell, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, 122 [with my modifications]).

⁸³ On pragmata as objects of description within ekphrasis, see Webb, *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion*, 67–69.

⁸⁴ Ps.-Hermogenes, *On Ekphrasis* (Webb, *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion*, 200). The attribution to Hermogenes is debated; see Heath, “Theon and the History of the *Progymnasmata*.”

⁸⁵ Libanius, *Progymnasmata* 6 (C. A. Gibson, trans., *Libanius’s Progymnasmata: Model Exercises in Greek Prose Composition and Rhetoric* [Leiden, 2009], 440–42); Webb, *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion*, 68.

σῶμα ὥνησε τήν τε ψυχὴν οὐκ ἔβλαψεν).⁸⁶ But in excess, one “is compelled to suffer such things” (*τοίαδε ἀνάγκη πάσχειν*), and then the fourth-century orator describes inebriation through different conditions of gesture, speech, and appearance.⁸⁷ Similarly, Climacus focuses on the visibility of anguish as a psychosomatic, altered state appearing in disordered gesture, speech, and posture.

Climacus’s ever-shifting gaze gives this part of the ekphrasis a particularly dizzying, disorienting quality. He speaks as though caught amidst an all-encompassing mass, witnessing action as if in a gymnasium. Everywhere he looks, another strange body steals his attention. This effect of a constant bombardment with visual stimuli is called *ekplexis* (from *ἐκπλήσσω*).⁸⁸ Ekplexis describes the state of being overpowered by a building’s visual plethora, a mental submission to the sight before you. For example, Procopius tries to capture how Hagia Sophia incited an experience of ekplexis through its interior’s chaotic variety of different lines of sight:

All of these details, fitted together with incredible skill in mid-air, and floating off from each other and resting only on the parts next to them, produce a single and most extraordinary harmony in the work and yet do not permit the spectator to linger much over the study of any one of them, but each detail attracts the eye and draws it on irresistibly to itself. So the vision constantly shifts suddenly, for the beholder is utterly unable to select which particular detail he should admire more than all the others. But even so, though they turn their attention to every side and look with contracted brows upon every detail, observers are still unable to understand the skillful craftsmanship, but they always depart from there overwhelmed by the bewildering sight.⁸⁹

86 Libanius, *Progymnasmata* 6 (Gibson, *Libanius’s Progymnasmata*, 440).

87 Libanius, *Progymnasmata* 6 (Gibson, *Libanius’s Progymnasmata*, 440–41).

88 S. Goldhill, “What Is Ekphrasis For?,” *CPh* 102.1 (2007): 1–19, at 7.

89 Procopius, *Buildings* I.1.47–50 (H. B. Dewing and G. Downey, trans., Loeb 343 [London, 1940]): ταῦτα δὲ πάντα ἐς ἄλληλά τε παρὰ δόξαν ἐν μεταρσίω ἐναρμοσθέντα, ἐκ τε ἀλλήλων ἡωρημένα καὶ μόνοις ἐναπεριδόμενα τοῖς ἄγχιστα σύστησι, μίαν μὲν ἀρμονίαν ἐκπρεπεστάτην τοῦ ἔργου ποιοῦνται, οὐ παρέχονται δὲ τοῖς θεωμένοις αὐτῶν τινι ἐμφιλοχωρεῖν ἐπὶ πολὺ τὴν δύνιν, ἀλλὰ μεθέλκει τὸν ὁφθαλμὸν ἔκαστον, καὶ μεταβιβάζει

Of course, Procopius’s sense of beauty and astonishment is far different, and it is impossible to claim Climacus’s knowledge of the source. The point is, however, that both passages make perceptual confusion, the inability to focus on a single point in the visual field, a sustained effect. The audience would have had to move imaginatively with Climacus, and rapidly, too; such rapidity paralleled the violence inherent to his discourse. But just as Procopius describes a “single and most extraordinary harmony” even in the variegated interior, so Climacus creates a sense of cohesion among the penitential movements. Even in their variety, their gestures all cohere into an image of an anguished collective at work.

Climacus applies another trope related to periegesis. Several times he signals how his enchantment undoes his speech’s sense of progress. Again, this disorganization is meant to aggrandize the described object, to claim the spectacle was so engrossing that it frustrates language itself. Such a rhetorical “push self-consciously at the limits of descriptive language”—to borrow Verity Platt’s phrase—abounds in ancient and late antique ekphrases.⁹⁰ Paul the Silentary was so thunderstruck by Hagia Sophia that he asks, “Where am I carried? Where tends my unbridled speech?”⁹¹ Climacus deploys the same sense of being carried away toward the end of the description: “And I, my friends, was so pleased by their grief that I was carried away, enraptured, unable to contain myself. But I must return to my discourse.”⁹² A later part of this essay will explore how the ekphrasis provided not just an account of this space but modeled conventions for an audience to respond; for now, the point is that Climacus employs a trope of ekphrasis in

ρᾶστα ἐφ’ ἑαυτό. ἀγχιστροφός τε ἡ τῆς θέας μεταβολὴ ἐς ἀεὶ γίγνεται, ἀπολέξασθαι τοῦ ἐσορῶντος οὐδαμῆ ἔχοντος ὅ τι ἄν ποτε ἀγασθείη μᾶλλον τῶν ἀλλῶν ἀπάντων. ἀλλὰ καὶ ὡς ἀποσκοπούντες πανταχόστε τὸν νοῦν, τάς τε ὁφρύς ἐπὶ πᾶσι συννεφεκότες, οὐχ οἷοί τε εἰσὶ ξυνεῖναι τῆς τέχνης, ἀλλ’ ἀπαλλάσσονται ἀεὶ ἐνθένδε καταπεπληγμένοι τῇ ἐς τὴν δύνιν ἀμηχανίᾳ. ταῦτα μὲν οὖν τῇδε πῃ ἔχει.

90 Such confusion is even found in Johann Joachim Winckelmann’s account of the Belvedere Torso. See V. Platt, “Re-Membering the Belvedere Torso: Ekphrastic Restoration and the Teeth of Time,” *CI* 47.1 (2020): 49–75, esp. 67.

91 Paulus Silentarius, “Descr. S. Sophiae,” 443 (Mango, trans., *The Art of the Byzantine Empire*, 82).

92 Ἐγὼ δέ, ὃ φίοι, λέληθα ἐμαυτὸν ἐν τῷ ἐκείνῳ ἐμφιλοχωρῶν πένθει, καὶ ὅλος τῷ νοῦ συνηρπάγην, κατέχειν ἐμαυτὸν μὴ δυνάμενος. Ἀλλ’ ἐπανακτέον τὸν λόγον (Trevisan, *Scala paradisi*, 1:229; Luibheid and Russell, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, 128).

describing his response in the terms of an altering, all-consuming ecstasy.

In addition to periegesis, all rhetorical theorists distinguished ekphrasis from narrative by another means. In Nikolaos the Sophist's *Progymnasmata*, he says that "ekphrasis differs from *diegesis* in this respect: the latter sets out the subject generally [τὰ καθόλου] while the former goes into detail [κατὰ μέρος]."⁹³ And while the previous section, replete with descriptions of violent action, was no doubt detailed, Climacus focuses most on surface appearances and abject bodily appearances in this section:

We must run, brothers, we must run. We have to run very hard because we have fallen behind our holy company. So let us run, driving on this foul and wicked flesh of ours, killing it as it has killed us." And that precisely is what these holy men who had been called to account were doing. With knees like wood, as a result of all the prostrations, with eyes dimmed and sunken, with hair gone and cheeks wasted and scalded by many hot tears, with faces pale and worn, they were no different from corpses. Their breasts were livid from all the beatings, which had even made them spit blood. There was not rest for them in beds, no clean and laundered clothing. They were bedraggled, dirty, and venomous. Compared with this, what are the sufferings of the possessed, of those mourning the dead, of the exiled, or of those condemned for murder? These are suffering involuntary torture and punishment. But this is nothing in comparison with suffering deliberately sought.⁹⁴

93 Nikolaos, *Progymnasmata* (Webb, trans., *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion*, 203): διαφέρει δὲ καὶ κατ' ἑκεῖνο τῆς διηγήσεως, διτὶ ή μὲν τὰ καθόλου, ή δὲ τὰ κατὰ μέρος ἔξετάζει.

94 Διὸ καὶ ἔντονς διεγέροντες, ἔλεγον. "Δράμωμεν, ἀδελφοί, δράμωμεν. δρόμου γάρ χρεῖα καὶ δρόμου, ἐπειδὴ τῆς καλῆς ἡμῶν συνοδίας ἀπελείφθημεν. δράμωμεν μὴ φειδόμενοι ταύτης τῆς ρύπρᾶς καὶ μοχθηρᾶς σαρκὸς ἡμῶν. ἀλλ' ἀποκτείνωμεν ἀντὴν, ὡς ἀπέκτεινεν ἡμάς, ὥσπερ καὶ ἐποίουν οἱ μακάριοι ὑπεύθυνοι." Ἐν ἑκείνοις ἔωράτο γόνατα ἐπεσκληρότα, τῷ πλήθει τῶν μετανοιῶν. οἱ ὄφθαλμοι ἐκτακέντες καὶ ἔσω που εἰς βάθος δεδυκότες. τριχῶν ἀπεστερημένοι, παρειάς κεκτημένοι πεπληγέμνας, καὶ περιπεφλεγμένας τῇ ζέσει τῶν πολλῶν δακρύων. πρόσωπα κεταμεμαρασμένα καὶ ὠχρά, μηδὲν ἐν συγκρίσει νεκρῶν διαφέροντα. στήθη ταῖς πληγαῖς ἀλγοῦντα καὶ αἰμάτων πτύελοι, ἐκ τῶν ἐν τῷ στήθῃ πυγμῶν ἐκπεμπόμενοι—Ποὺ ἦν ἑκεῖ στρωμνῆς κατάστασις; ποὺ ἐνδύματος καθαρότης ἡ στερεότης; Άλλὰ διερήγημένα καὶ ρυπώντα καὶ ὑπό

This passage's visual qualities are remarkable. Climacus's evocation of the prisoners' physicality could double as a description of sculpted bodies caught in states of possession. Consistent with earlier parts, Climacus upholds these men at a distance, marveling at them as wonders. But here, their repulsive (*ρύπωντα*) appearance, their "bedraggled hair," "hot tears," and spit "blood" coheres, paradoxically, with spiritual ideals. He compares them both to corpses and to real criminals, as though a foreign people, and yet they are neither. In this passage we find echoes of what Theon's rhetorical exercises called "descriptive [*περιηγηματικός*] speech," which was typically fit for the description "of persons, as in the Homeric passage, 'He was round-shouldered, dark-skinned, with curly hair' . . . and so on, and in Herodotus the appearance of the ibis, of hippopotami and crocodiles in Egypt."⁹⁵ And in the final part of this section, when Climacus compares the holy prisoners to real murderers, to those actually "possessed," he is reflecting on how description allows for imagined resemblances. But he is also claiming that, in resembling convicts only in part, the holy prisoners' self-abuse is performative, a point to which we now turn.

In the passages describing the prisoners' toil, we discover Climacus's use of another technique adjacent to ekphrasis in the rhetorical handbooks, ethopoeia. The *Progymnasmata* attributed to Hermogenes defines ethopoeia as "an imitation of the character of a person supposed to be speaking; for example, what words Andromache might say to Hector."⁹⁶ About halfway through the ekphrasis, having introduced the sight of the men at a distance, Climacus begins to imitate the prisoners' agonized speech:

τοῦ φθειρός ἐπικεκαλυμένα. Τί πρὸς ἑκείνους ἡ τῶν δαιμονώντων κακοπάθεια; τί ἡ τῶν νεκρούς πενθούντων; τί ἡ τῶν ἐξορίᾳ διαγόντων; τί ἡ τῶν ἐπὶ φόνοις καταδίκων; Οὐδὲν ὅντως ἡ ἑκείνων βάσανος, καὶ τιμωρία ἀκούσιος πρὸς τὴν τούτων ἑκούσιον (Trevisan, *Scala paradisi*, 1:219; Luibheid and Russell, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, 125).

95 Theon, *Progymnasmata* 118.6 (Webb, trans., *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion*, 197–99): Προσώπων μὲν οὖν, οἷον τὸ Όμηρικόν, γύρος ἔην ὥμοις μελανόχροος, οὐλοκάρηνος, καὶ τὰ περὶ τοῦ θερστού, φοξὸς ἔην κεφαλήν, χαλὸς δ' ἔτερον πόδα, καὶ τὰ ἔξης, καὶ παρ' Ἡροδότῳ τὸ εἶδος τῆς ιβίδος καὶ τῶν ἵππων τῶν ποταμίων καὶ τῶν κροκοδειλῶν τῶν Αἰγαπτίων.

96 Ps.-Hermogenes, *Works* (G. Kennedy, trans., *Progymnasmata: Greek Textbooks of Prose Composition and Rhetoric* [Leiden, 2003], 84): Ηθοποία ἐστὶ μίμησις ἥθους ὑποκειμένου προσώπου, οἷον τίνας ἀνείποι λόγους Ἀνδρομάχη ἐπὶ Ἐκτορί.

These were the shouts and cries they raised to the Lord without ceasing. Striking their breasts, as though standing before the gates of heaven, some would say to God: “Open to us, O Judge! Open up! We have shut ourselves out with our sins. Open up to us!” Others would say, “Just show us the light of your face and we will be saved!” Another would say: “Give light to those sitting humbly in darkness and in the shadow of death.” Another would say, “Ah, Lord, let your mercy go speeding before us (Psalms 78:8) for we have perished in despair and have fallen completely away.” Some said: “Will the Lord ever again show the light of his face to us?” (Psalms 66:2), and others, “Will our souls survive the unbearable debt?” (Psalms 123:5), while yet others said, “Will the Lord be moved at least to have mercy on us (Judges 2:18)? Will we ever hear him say to those of us in endless bondage, ‘Come forth’ (Isaiah 49:9), and to those of us in the hell of penance, ‘Be forgiven’? Has our cry come to the ears of the Lord?”⁹⁷

The prisoners’ recitations, presented in sequential order and accompanied by their violent self-striking, makes this passage a description of ritual, ceremonial action. Here, the lengthy description follows a somewhat common ekphrastic subtype, what George A. Kennedy in his translation of Hermogenes’ *Progymnasmata* terms “occasions.”⁹⁸

However, Climacus’s ethopoeia causes the audience to confront a dynamic of absence and presence. At one level, Climacus’s impersonation of the prisoners brings them closer to the audience. But ethopoeia draws the audience’s attention to that ambiguous space

97 Οἱ μὲν τὸ στήθος ἰσχυρῶς κρούντες, ὡςπερ ἐν τῇ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ πυλῇ ιστάμενοι, πρὸς Θέον ἔλεγον. “Ἄνοιξον ἡμῖν, Δικαστὰ. ἀνοίξον ἡμῖν, ἐπειδὴ ἀμαρτίαις ἐκλείσαμεν ἑαυτοῖς, ἀνοίξον ἡμῖν.” Οἱ δὲ ἔλεγον. “Ἐπίφανον τὸ πρόσωπόν σου” μόνον, “καὶ σωθησόμεθα.” Ἀλλος πάλιν, “Ἐπίφανον τοῖς ἐν σκότει καὶ σκιᾷ θανάτου καθημένοις” ταπεινοῖς. “Ἐτερος, “Ταχὺ προκαταλαβέτωσαν ἡμᾶς οἱ οἰκτιρμοί σου, Κύρε, ὅτι ἀπολάλαμεν, ὅτι ἀπεγνώσκαμεν, ὅτι ἐξελίτομεν σφόδρα.” Οἱ μὲν ἔλεγον. “Εἰ ἄρα ἐπιφάνοι Κύριος τοῦ λοιποῦ ἐφ’ ἡμᾶς;” “Ἐτεροι δε. “Ἄρα διηλθεν ἡ ψυχὴ ἡμῶν τὸ χρέος τὸ ἀνυπόστατον;” Ἀλλος, “Ἄρα ἀρακληθῆσεται Κύριος τοῦ λοιποῦ ἐφ’ ἡμᾶς;” ἄρα ἀκουσόμεθα αὐτοῦ, λέγοντος ἡμῖν τοῖς ἐν δεσμοῖς ἀλύτοις. “Ἐξέθετε” καὶ τοῖς ἐν τῷ ἀδήν τῆς μετανοίας. “Συγχωρήθητε; Άρα εἰσῆλθεν ἡ κραυγὴ ἡμῶν εἰς τὰ ὄντα Κύριον;” (Trevisan, *Scala paradisi*, 1:217; Luibheid and Russell, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, 124).

98 Ps.-Hermogenes, *Works* (Kennedy, *Progymnasmata*, 86).

between presence and absence occupied by the figure of Christ the Judge. And in circumscribing this kind of negative image of the Judge, Climacus constructs a space of suspense and submission. This creates boundaries and limitations between the prisoners and the all-seeing Judge while asserting that the prisoners are always centrally dictated by him, if invisibly so. Thus, ethopoeia allows for Climacus to draw attention to the limits of the visible, to an invisible presence, while also rendering the threat of that invisible surveillance through the prisoners’ anguished cries. What emerges is a negative image, the Judge’s specter.

Ethopoeia allows Climacus to circumscribe even more absent phenomena within the Prison. Through the convicts’ voices, Climacus evokes spaces beyond their confines and their final meeting with the Judge. Climacus constructs this experience most potently toward the end of the ekphrasis when he describes:

The last hour of one of these was fearful to behold. When the penitents in the Prison learned that one of their number was finishing his course and going on ahead of them, they would gather round while his mind was still working. Thirsty, tearful, and sad, they would look at him compassionately, shaking their heads, racked with tenderness, and they would speak to the dying man: “Brother and fellow penitent, how is it with you? What will you say? What are your hopes and expectations? Have you achieved what you worked for so hard, or have you not? Has the door been opened to you or are you still under sentence? . . . Did you hear an inner voice saying, ‘You are made whole’ (John 5:14), or ‘Your sins are forgiven’ (Matthew 9:2), or ‘Your faith has saved you’ (Mark 5:34)? Or did a voice say, ‘Let sinner be cast into hell’ (Psalms 9:18), ‘Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the darkness outside’ (Matthew 22:13); ‘Let the wicked man be expelled so that he may not see the glory of the Lord’ (Isaiah 26:10)? Can you say anything to us, Brother? Please tell us, so that we may know how it will be for us.”⁹⁹

99 Οἵον δὲ καὶ τὸ θέαμα φοβερὸν καὶ ἐλεεινὸν τῆς ἐκείνων ἐσχάτης ὥρας. Ὁπόταν γὰρ οἱ συγκατάδικοι τὸν προπορευόμενον τελειοῦσθαι μέλλοντα ἥσθοντο, ἔτι τοῦ νοὸς ἐρρωμένου, περιεκύλουν, καὶ διψῶντες,

Here, Climacus renders the event of death into something fearful to behold ($\tauὸ θέαμα φοβερὸν$) in several respects. At one level, the recitation of scripture constructs a sense of action. The prisoners' insistent questioning holds the intersection of death and the divine as an object of desperate inquiry. Their collective prodding itself becomes a collective exegetical experience. Indeed, in an earlier part of the ekphrasis, Climacus says they engaged in the activity of "ceaselessly contemplating death."¹⁰⁰ This ritual atmosphere becomes more urgent when Climacus portrays the dying monk as possessing oracular ability. His visionary death throes become images. The dying monk sees something but does not divulge exactly what: "Woe to the soul," he says, "that has not kept its vow unblemished! In this hour, and in this one only, it will discover what is prepared for it."¹⁰¹ What is described here is not entrance into the Last Judgment but what Vasileios Marinis calls "the intermediate state" after death and the "provisional judgment" before the Eschaton.¹⁰² By the time Climacus wrote *The Heavenly Ladder* there was no unified theory of where the soul goes immediately after death.¹⁰³ Thus, Climacus teaches his own approach to the enigma and does so spatially. The monks' various questions about the spatial, visual, and even auditory aspects of this intermediate state treat it as though it is a real *topos*, a

καὶ πενθοῦντες ἐλεεινοτάτῳ ἥθει καὶ σκυθρωπῷ λόγῳ τὴν κεφαλὴν σείσοντες τὴν ἑαυτῶν, ἡρώων τὸν ἐκλείποντα. καὶ καιόμενοι τῇ συμπαθείᾳ τῇ πρὸς αὐτὸν, ἔλεγον. "Τί ἐστιν, ἀδελφὲ καὶ συγκατάδικε, πῶς; τί λέγεις; τί ἐλπίζεις; τί ὑπόλαμβάνεις;" Ἡνυσας ἐκ τοῦ κόπου τὸ ζητούμενον, ἢ οὐκ ἵσχυσας; "Ηνοίξας, ἢ ὑπεύθυνος ἔτι ὑπάρχεις; ἔφθασας, ἢ οὐκ ἐπέτυχες;" Ἐλαβές τινα πληροφορίαν, ἢ ἀδηλον ἔχεις τὴν ἐλπίδα; . . . Ἐγένετο τις ἐν σοὶ φωνὴ λέγουσα ἔνδον "Ιδε ὑγιῆς γέγονας" ἢ, "Αφέωνται σου αἱ ἀμαρτίαι;" ἢ "Ἡ πίστις σου σέσωκε σε;" ἢ ἄρα ἔτι ἐκείνης ἀκούεις τῆς λεγούσης, "Ἀποστραφήτωσαν οἱ ἀμαρτωλοὶ εἰς τὸν ἄδην;" καὶ 'Δῆσατε χεῖρας καὶ πόδας;' καὶ 'Ἄρθητω ὁ ἀσεβής, ἵνα μὴ ἴδῃ τὴν δόξαν Κυρίου;' Τί λέγεις ἀπλῶς, ἀδελφέ, εἰτὲ ἡμῖν, δυστροφούμεν, ἵνα καὶ ἡμεῖς γνῶμεν, ἐν ποίοις μέλλομεν ἔσεσθαι" (Trevisan, *Scala paradisi*, 1:223–25; Luibheid and Russell, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, 126).

100 Πάντες δὲ ἐκάθηγντο ἀεὶ ἐν ὁφθαλμοῖς αὐτῶν ὅρῶντες τὸν θάνατον (Trevisan, *Scala paradisi*, 1:217; Luibheid and Russell, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, 124).

101 Οὐαὶ ψυχῇ, τῇ μὴ φυλαξάσῃ τὸ ἐπάγγελμα ἄμωμον, ἐν τῇ ὥρᾳ ταύτῃ, καὶ μόνῃ, γνώστεται τί αὐτῇ ἡτοίμασται (Trevisan, *Scala paradisi*, 1:225; Luibheid and Russell, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, 126–27).

102 V. Marinis, *Death and the Afterlife in Byzantium: The Fate of the Soul in Theology, Liturgy, and Art* (Cambridge, 2017), 15–27.

103 On this "extraordinary variety," see Marinis, *Death and the Afterlife*, 23–27.

kind of void, albeit with some traces of an architectonics.¹⁰⁴ Like an obscure chamber, this *topos* could carry the resonance of Christ's voice, even possess furnishings like a door or a means of tossing sinners to a bottomless descent.¹⁰⁵ And thus, Climacus finishes his ekphrasis by inviting his audience to meditate on obscure horizons, on the very limits of the imaginable.

Ekphrasis as Ritual

To summarize, then, Climacus does not just describe a single object. He constructs a highly complex mixed ekphrasis, focusing on spaces, events, and people, and reconfiguring space and time into an experience of infinite tedium, a hell on Earth. Additionally, he uses the devices of periegesis and ethopoeia with the intention of striking an indelible imprint on listeners' imaginations and memories. The following section engages with how such imprinting relates to broader psychosomatic practices in monastic formation. But we must first examine the specific end to which John wields *enargeia*, that vividness in "vivid description."

Whether called vividness or visibility, the phenomenon of *enargeia* has a rich and varied reception.¹⁰⁶ Hermogenes makes *enargeia* one of two key qualities of an ekphrasis (the other being *saphenia*, or clarity).¹⁰⁷ For instance, Climacus achieves *enargeia* when animating the prisoners' speeches. He also wields the technique in passages such as the one where he begs the audience to compare the penitents to "the possessed, of those mourning the dead, of the exiled, or of those condemned for murder." This rhetoric draws the audience to imagine their own experiences of destitution and to fill in Climacus's verbal image with one from their own memory. It is in this process that the effect of *enargeia*

104 Later Byzantine art would picture this dimensionality. For aspects of this tradition, see Marinis, *Death and the Afterlife*, 53–73.

105 On the spatiality of death and the afterlife conceived in terms of entrance, see R. Dijkstra, "Imagining the Entrance to the Afterlife: Peter as the Gatekeeper of Heaven in Early Christianity," in *Sacred Thresholds: The Door to the Sanctuary in Late Antiquity*, Religions in the Graeco-Roman World 185, ed. E. M. van Opstall (Brill, 2018).

106 For a synthesis of the literature, see Betancourt, *Sight, Touch, and Imagination*, 203–10; Webb, *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion*, 87–106. For the later context, see S. Papaioannou, "Byzantine Enargeia and Theories of Representation," *BSL* 69 (2011): 48–60.

107 Elsner, "The Genres of Ekphrasis," 1.

opens an imaginative space and an opportunity for mnemonic imprinting.

Yet enargeia is more than just depth of detail. When wielded skillfully, enargeia could suspend and dislocate an audience's sense of space and time. Small wonder that rhetorical theorists associated enargeia with trances, hypnosis, and even embodied changes of the sort catalyzed by actual *pharmaka*, or drugs.¹⁰⁸ Orators employed the effect to manipulate, even dictate, the audience's emotions, romanticizing the technique as though a weapon.¹⁰⁹ Climacus himself already hints at his own subject's transportive and transformative quality, saying he was "pleased . . . carried away, enraptured." But well before him, the first-century Roman orator Quintilian taught how descriptions of violence were particularly well-suited for explaining enargeia and its ability to transport listeners to alternate scenarios, such as the scene of a crime:¹¹⁰

When I am lamenting a murdered man will I not have before my eyes all the things which might believably have happened in the case under consideration? Will the assailant not suddenly spring out, will the victim not be terrified when he finds himself surrounded and cry out or plead or run away? Will I not see the blow and the victim falling to the ground? Will his blood, his pallor, his dying groans not be impressed on my mind? This gives rise

¹⁰⁸ Most recently, Betancourt, *Sight, Touch, and Imagination*, 206–10. On the connection between rhetorical and pharmaka, see J. Walker, "Pathos and *Katharsis* in 'Aristotelian' Rhetoric: Some Implications" in *Reading Aristotle's Rhetoric*, ed. A. Gross and A. Walzer (Carbondale, IL, 2000), 74–92.

¹⁰⁹ Goldhill conceives of enargeia in precisely such terms of weaponry and violence: Goldhill, "What Is an Ekphrasis For?," 6. On enargeia and emotion, see two important studies by R. Webb: "Accomplishing the Picture: Ekphrasis, Mimesis, and Martyrdom in Asterios of Amaseia," in *Art and Text in Byzantine Culture*, ed. L. James (Cambridge, 2007), 13–32; and "Imagination and the Arousal of Emotions in Greco-Roman Rhetoric," in *The Passions in Roman Thought and Literature*, ed. S. M. Braund and C. Gill (Cambridge, 1997), 112–27. Also, R. Cockcroft, "Fine-Tuning Quintilian's Doctrine of Rhetorical Emotion: Seven Kinds of Enargeia," in *Quintiliano: Historia y actualidad de la retórica. Actas del congreso; XIX Centenario de la "Institutio Oratoria"*, vol. 2, ed. T. Albaladejo, E. del Río, and J. A. Caballero (Logroño, 1998), 503–10.

¹¹⁰ Webb, *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion*, 94.

to enargeia, which Cicero calls *illustratio* and *evidentia*, by which we seem to show what happened rather than to tell it; and this gives rise to the same emotions as if we were present at the event itself.¹¹¹

Granted, Quintilian argued this point in Latin, but he was undoubtedly extending Greek tradition. For just like Quintilian's example, Climacus heaps details of dying groans, of "pale and worn faces," of men who "spit blood," and of men who were no different from corpses.¹¹² And Climacus's statement about his images being present in the minds of his audience "for as long as [they] live" corresponds exactly to Quintilian's conception of images being "impressed" on the mind. Above all, Quintilian comments on a dynamic of enargeia that Climacus puts into practice, making his audience "present at the event itself." In Climacus's case, the effect was tantamount to placing them, if temporarily, in prison.

Quintilian was hardly the only source who believed well-executed enargeia could enact the experience of bondage. In his famous treatise on rhetoric and style, *On the Sublime* (*Περὶ ὕψους*), Longinus said: "What, then, is the effect of rhetorical visualization? There is much it can do to bring urgency and passion into our words; but it is when it is closely involved with factual arguments that as well as persuading the listener, it enslaves him."¹¹³ This passage is evocative for its fixation on speech bringing about a hypnotic, entrancing sway with real physical consequences for listeners. But like Quintilian, Longinus describes this effect in a broader commentary on effective rhetoric

¹¹¹ Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* 6.2.31–32 (Webb, trans., *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion*, 94): *Hominem occisum queror: non omnia quae in re praesenti accidisse credibile est in oculis habeo? non precursor ille subitus erumpet? on expauescat circumuentus, exclamabit uel rogabit uel fugiet? non ferientem, non concidentem uidebo? non animo sanguis et pallor et gemitus, extremus denique exspirantis hiatus insidet? Insequetur ἐνάργεια, quae a Cicerone illustratio et evidentia nominatur, quae non tam dicere uidetur quam ostendere, et adfectus non aliter quam si rebus ipsis intersimus sequentur.*

¹¹² See above, n. 94.

¹¹³ Longinus, *On the Sublime* 15.9 (W. H. Fyfe, trans., Loeb Classical Library 199 [Cambridge, 1995]): *Τί οὖν ἡ ῥήτορικὴ φαντασία δύναται; πολλὰ μὲν ἵσως καὶ ἄλλα τοῖς λόγοις ἐναγώνια καὶ ἐμπαθῆ προσεισφέρειν, κατακυριαμένη μέντοι ταῖς πραγματικαῖς ἐπιχειρήσεσιν οὐ πειθεῖ τὸν ἀκροατὴν μόνον ἀλλὰ καὶ δουλοῦται. See, more recently, J. I. Porter, *The Sublime in Antiquity* (Cambridge, 2016).*

and compositional tactics.¹¹⁴ Such bondage described the feeling of being persuaded to total assent. However, Climacus transposes this strategy in rhetoric—this graphicness so spellbinding that its sway could enact bondage—into a kind of religious practice. To understand this transmutation from the rhetorical to the religious, we must consider how the event of listening to the ekphrasis was itself a ritual.

At the end of the ekphrasis, Climacus challenges the audience to immerse themselves in the Prison in order escape from it:

Now I know well, my friends, that these labors I have described will seem unbelievable to some, unattainable to others, and be a source of despair to others still. Yet they will actually be incentive to a brave soul, a fiery blast, so that he will go away with zeal in his heart.¹¹⁵

This passage regarding inspiration simultaneously resembles and differs from earlier Christian ekphrases that train a view of suffering.¹¹⁶ An example of such a different response survives in an earlier ekphrasis by Asterius (330/335–420/425), once bishop of Amaseia (today, Amysia, Turkey), in which he describes a painted cycle of Euphemia's martyrdom.¹¹⁷ At the end of the ekphrasis, at the sight of her brutal execution, Asterius bemoans, “I weep from now on—I am too shocked to

¹¹⁴ On the relationship between ekphrasis and persuasion, see Webb, *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion*, 131–67. On rhetoric in the courtroom, see M. Winterbottom, “Schoolroom and Courtroom,” in *Papers on Quintilian and Ancient Declamation*, ed. F. R. Nocchi, G. Russo, and A. Stramaglia (Oxford, 2019), 92–102; H. F. Plett, *Enargeia in Classical Antiquity and the Early Modern Age*, International Studies in the History of Rhetoric 4 (Leiden, 2012).

¹¹⁵ Οὐκ ἀγνοῶ δὲ ἔγώ, ὃ θαυμάσιοι, ὅτι τοῖσιν μὲν ἄπιστα, ἐτέροις δὲ ἀνέλιπιστα, ἄλλοις δὲ ἀπόγνωσιν τίκτοντα φαίνονται, ἀπερ διηγησάμην ἔπιαθλα. Ἀνήρ δὲ ἀνδρεῖος ἐκ τούτων προσελάβετο κέντρον, καὶ βέλος πύρος, καὶ ζῆλον ἐν καρδίᾳ ἀπῆλθε βαστάζων (Treisan, *Scala paradisi*, 1:233; Luibheid and Russell, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, 129, with my modifications).

¹¹⁶ Recently on ekphrasis as Christian paideia, see Marinis, “Asterius of Amaseia’s *Ekphrasis*,” esp. 288–96. On experiencing pain in earlier forms of Greek paideia: D. King, *Experiencing Pain in Imperial Greek Culture* (Oxford, 2017), esp. 161–75.

¹¹⁷ Marinis, “Asterius of Amaseia’s *Ekphrasis*,” 285 (with bibliography).

speak.”¹¹⁸ Inciting this response was an effect of the painting that Asterius describes with the term *enargos*, the root of *enargeia*.¹¹⁹ The work’s vividness caused a moment of misrecognition in which Asterius could no longer differentiate red paint from Euphemia’s actual blood. “Lamenting,” Asterius “turns away.”¹²⁰ Here, we can read, as Leslie Brubaker once did, in Asterius’s use of δακρύω, a somber, lachrymose response; his tears are in continuity with the *pathoi* of ekphrasis in the *Aeneid* when Aeneas confronts an image of the Trojan War.¹²¹

For Climacus, however, ekphrasis and phantasia should produce opposite effects. Hardly instructing a language of tearful pity at the prisoners’ suffering, he urges his audience to face, even fuse with the penitents’ image by embodying their example. Their “labors” ought to launch a “fiery blast” in the listeners. And this is not just another martial metaphor: Climacus’s recourse to temperature, ignition, and weaponry here captures a form of jolting, ballistic arousal different from, perhaps even less defined than, generic *pathoi* such as pity.¹²² Thus, the experience of ekphrasis was meant to yield actual bodily change, a sense of volatility, a hot *sensation* (*αἰσθησίς*). And this sensation, this toughening bellicosity that he captures with the term βέλος, was understood in relation to manhood, bravery as defined with the term, ἀνδρεῖος.

We may thus place the effects of ekphrasis within a system of masculine embodiment because Climacus charts a relationship between his imagery and the production of explosive energy meant to affect both body and soul. Rhetoric was indeed a fuel for the type of masculine figure discussed earlier, the classic desert ascetic warrior, the man marching in Christ’s

¹¹⁸ Δακρύω δὲ τὸ ἐντεῦθεν καὶ μοι τὸ πάθος ἐπικόπτει τὸν λόγον: see Asterius of Amaseia, “*Ἐκφρασις εἰς τὴν ἀγίαν Εὐφημίαν τὴν πανεύφημον*” (F. Halkin, ed., *Euphémie de Chalcédoine: Légendes Byzantines* [Brussels, 1965], 8); Asterius of Amaseia, “Ecphrasis on the Holy Martyr Euphemia,” in “*Let Us Die That We May Live*: Greek Homilies on Christian Martyrs from Asia Minor, Palestine and Syria (c. AD 350–AD 450), ed. and trans., J. Leemans, W. Mayer, P. Allen, and B. Dedhandschutter (London, 2003), 174–76, esp. 176.

¹¹⁹ On *enargeia* in this passage, most recently: Betancourt, *Sight, Touch, and Imagination*, 208–10.

¹²⁰ Asterius, “Ecphrasis,” 176.

¹²¹ L. Brubaker, “Perception and Conception: Art, Theory, and Culture in Ninth-Century Byzantium,” *Word & Image* 5.1 (1989): 19–32, esp. 24.

¹²² On *pathoi*, see D. Konstan, *The Emotions of the Ancient Greeks: Studies in Aristotle and Classical Literature* (Toronto, 2006).

army. For Climacus, this energy was something more than abstract fervor. As *The Heavenly Ladder* proceeds, bodily temperature is the means through which Climacus conceives psychosomatic balance and spiritual change. The challenges of anchoritic isolation were always threatening to throw such balance into disequilibrium. Climacus's conception of zeal as fire—of incendiary sensation as a means of dictating the way the soma affects the psyche—becomes apparent when we contrast the violent arousal with the condition described in step thirteen (Περὶ ἀκηδίας): the chills and disorienting torpor of *acedia*.¹²³ The dreaded “despondency,” *acedia*, according to Climacus, yielded symptoms of melancholy. He defines it as a “paralysis of the soul” (*πάρεσις ψυχῆς*). The melancholic weight of *acedia* freezes the spiritual athlete’s momentum. Climacus describes the condition:

At the third hour, the demon of *acedia* causes shivering, headache, and vertigo. By the ninth hour, the patient has recovered his strength, and when dinner is ready, he jumps out of bed. But now when the time for prayer comes, his body begins to languish once more. He begins his prayers, but the tedium makes him sleep and the verses of the psalms are snatched from his mouth by untimely yawns. . . . A brave soul can stir up his dying mind, but tedium and laziness scatter every one of his treasures.¹²⁴

Climacus here suddenly shifts tones from that of the monastic authority to the *iatrosophist*, employing a language of medical precision. *Acedia* is not simply a general malaise but an illness with the visibly evident symptoms of shivering, headache, and vertigo (Τρίωρον φρίκην καὶ κεφαλαλγίαν). The origins of this understanding of *acedia* stem from ancient conceptions

¹²³ A. Crislip, “The Sin of Sloth or the Illness of the Demons? The Demon of *Acedia* in Early Christian Monasticism,” *HTR* 98.2 (2005): 143–69; S. Wenzel, *The Sin of Sloth: Acedia in Medieval Thought and Literature* (Chapel Hill, 1967).

¹²⁴ Τρίωρον φρίκην καὶ κεφαλαλγίαν, πρότερον τε καὶ στρόφον ἀκηδίας δαιμῶν πεποίηκε. Τῆς ἐννάτης καταλαβούσης, μικρὸν ἀνένευσε. τῆς τε τραπέζης τεθείσης, τῆς στρωμής ἐπήδησε. Καὶ τῆς εὐχῆς καταλαβούσης, πάλιν τὸ σῶμα βεβάρηται. Ἐν προσευχῇ σταθέντα τῷ ὑπνῷ ἐβάπτισε, καὶ χάσμοις ἀκαίροις τοῦ στόματος τὸν στίχον διήρπασεν. . . . Ἀνδρείᾳ ψυχὴ νοῦν ἀποθανόντα ἀνέστησεν (Trevisan, *Scala paradisi*, 1:333; Luibheid and Russell, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, 163).

of illness.¹²⁵ In their study of such tradition, Raymond Kilbansky, Erwin Panofsky, and Fritz Saxl even cite Climacus’s passage on *acedia* as an example of theories of “monastic melancholia.”¹²⁶ Indeed, there was a precedent of spiritual authorities offering advice for curing *acedia*, exemplified by John Chrysostom’s letter to the despondent monk Stagirius.¹²⁷ Chrysostom himself certainly drew from his knowledge of Hippocratic thought when composing such consolatory writing.¹²⁸ This line of influence for Climacus warrants a separate study and may not even be so direct. The point is, nevertheless, Climacus’s various imaginative, penitential exercises, whether meditations on death or tearful mourning, were designed to induce physical effects, to set the body into motion. Meditation on the extent of the prisoners’ penitence would shock one from the weighty slackening of spiritual resolve. In the following section, step six, which is devoted to the remembrance of death, Climacus even says that intense visualization on death and divine judgment brought about the following physical effect: “If your remembrance of death is vivid [ἐναργῆς] and specific, you will cut down on your eating.”¹²⁹ Thus, he considered the sensations opened by the ekphrasis and its imagery part of the ascetic regimen of mortification. And as he states in the quote on *acedia*, those practices were fuel for igniting the brave, manly soul (Ἀνδρείᾳ ψυχὴ).

Climacus’s command places the representation of suffering in an economy of inspiration and exemplarity. It invites the audience to imitate the prisoner’s fortitude, always constructed in masculine terms. The prisoners’ masochistic acts were means of “killing their

¹²⁵ J. Jouanna, “At the Roots of Melancholy: Is Greek Medicine Melancholic?” in *Greek Medicine from Hippocrates to Galen: Selected Papers*, Studies in Ancient Medicine 40, ed. J. Scarborough, P. J. van der Eijk, A. E. Hanson, and J. Ziegler (Leiden, 2012), 229–58; J. Jouanna, “The Legacy of the Hippocratic Treatise *The Nature of Man*: The Theory of the Four Humours,” in Scarborough et al., *Greek Medicine from Hippocrates to Galen*, 335–59; R. Kilbansky, E. Panofsky, and F. Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy: Studies in the History of Natural Philosophy, Religion, and Art* (Montreal, 2019), 8, 13–15.

¹²⁶ Kilbansky, Panofsky, and Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy*, 76.

¹²⁷ Kilbansky, Panofsky, and Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy*, 75–77.

¹²⁸ B. Leyerle, “The Etiology of Sorrow and Its Therapeutic Benefits in the Preaching of John Chrysostom,” *JLA* 8.2 (2015): 368–85, at 371.

¹²⁹ Μνήμη θανάτου ἐναργῆς περίεκοψε βρώματα. Βρωμάτων δὲ ἐν ταπεινώσει κοπέντων, συνέζεκόπησαν πάθη (Trevisan, *Scala paradisi*, 1:247; Luibheid and Russell, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, 132, with my modifications).

flesh” so as to attain an enviable proximity to the Judge’s favor, to “quickly win His love for men.” In claiming that the prisoners’ images ought to inspire action, Climacus subtly follows yet another ekphrastic convention. In the *Homily on the Forty Martyrs* by Basil of Caesarea (330–379), likely delivered on 9 March 373, the church father relates the masculine passions of martyrdom in martial terms. Before describing the Forty Martyrs’ suffering, Basil exposes his speech’s purpose: “When both historians and painters express manly deeds of war, the one embellishing them with words, the other engraving them onto tablets, they both arouse many too to bravery.”¹³⁰ Henry Maguire and Ruth Webb have both focused on the influence of Basil’s passage on the development of ekphrasis in Byzantium.¹³¹ The same idea that words could convey images that incite masculine and martial—that is, *violent*—belligerent arousal, clearly dictates Climacus’s above-quoted purpose. However, whereas Basil was commemorating the martyrs’ death in a homily, Climacus rendered their “manly deeds” in a treatise. And whereas Basil was unclear as to how his audience could imitate the described action, Climacus was, in fact, disclosing instructions through the ekphrasis for how to sculpt and to purify the male body and soul. But toward what actions, specifically, was this fiery zeal meant to inspire? And how literal was the command to emulation?

These questions compel us to return to and to expand upon a previous issue. We must decipher how the prisoners’ blows, groans, soliloquys, and even their speechless grief could be modeling an extreme example of certain exercises. Their deeds embody two crucial phenomena: *penthos* and *katanyxis*. Climacus defines them in the steps after the ekphrasis. *Penthos* is the formal term for penitential grief for sin while *katanyxis* describes a chilling sensation at the thought of one’s sinful self in the face of divine judgment. Climacus describes the experience of *katanyxis* as “an eternal torture of the conscience.”¹³² But to understand how the

criminals’ self-striking and endless self-reproach were actual exercises evocative of these spiritual ideals, we may turn to another Church Father, John Chrysostom, who, like Basil, predates John Climacus by two and a half centuries.¹³³ His preaching in Antioch as well as his epistolary writings first established the conventions of apocalyptic penitence and mourning as a kind of choreographed suffering. He drew the content of his preaching from personal experience. Chrysostom lived among the earliest Syrian ascetics in a cave on Mount Silpios between 372 and 378. To follow their regimen, Chrysostom calls for the performance of “lamentation” (*όδυνμός*), “affliction” (*θλύψις*), “feeling pain” (*όδυνάν*), “being distressed” (*ἀλγεῖν*), “weeping” (*κλαυθμός*), “groaning” (*στεναγμός*), and “beating one’s breast” (*κόπτεσθαι*).¹³⁴ Thus, when Climacus claims the prisoners’ cheeks were “wasted and scalded by many hot tears,” he is adding hyperbole to a description of the sort of ritual outpouring and weeping that Chrysostom associated with penthos. And when Climacus describes how “their breasts were livid from all the beatings,” he again construes a hyperbolic, extreme image of the act of self-striking (*κόπτεσθαι*) commanded by Chrysostom.

¹²⁹, with my modifications). Regarding penthos: H. Hunt, *Joy-Bearing Grief: Tears of Contrition in the Writings of the Early Syrian and Byzantine Fathers*, Medieval Mediterranean 57 (Boston, 2004); F. Leduc, “Penthos et larmes dans l’oeuvre de Saint Jean Chrysostome,” *PrOC* 41 (1991): 220–57. For recent studies of katanyxis (with updated bibliography): A. Mellas, *Liturgy and the Emotions: Compunction and Hymnody* (Cambridge, 2020); A. Mellas, “Tears of Compunction in Byzantine Hymnody: The Hymnography of Romanos the Melodist, Andrew of Crete, and Kassia” (PhD diss., University of Sydney, 2017); D. Krueger, *Liturgical Subjects: Christian Ritual, Biblical Narrative, and the Formation of the Self in Byzantium* (Philadelphia, 2014), 164–96; A. Giannouli, “Catanyctic Religious Poetry: A Survey,” in *Theologica Minor: The Minor Genres of Byzantine Theological Literature*, ed. A. Rigo, P. Ermilov, and M. Trizio (Turnhout, 2013), 86–109, esp. n. 2; J. Chryssavgis, “A Spirituality of Imperfection: The Way of Tears in Saint John Climacus,” *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 37.4 (2002): 359–71.

¹³³ For the linguistic field through which Chrysostom describes these various experiences, see L. Brottier, *Les Propos sur la contrition de Jean Chrysostome: Le destin d’écrits de jeunesse méconnus* (Paris, 2010).

¹³⁴ J. S. Arlen, “‘Let Us Mourn Continuously’: John Chrysostom and the Early Christian Transformation of Mourning,” *S&P* 83 (2017): 289–313, esp. 292–93. See in the same volume an equally helpful essay: M. B. Freddoso, “The Value of Job’s Grief in John Chrysostom’s *Commentary on Job*: How John Blesses with Job’s Tears,” *S&P* 83 (2017): 271–87.

¹³⁰ Basil, *Homilia 19 In sanctos quadraginata martyres* (PG 31, 509B–C); Basil, “Homily on XL Martyrs” (Leemans et al., trans., “*Let Us Die*,” 79): οἱ μὲν τῷ λόγῳ διακοσμοῦντες, οἱ δὲ τοῖς πίναξιν ἐγχωράττοντες, καὶ πολλοὺς ἐπήγειραν πρὸς ἀνδρίαν ἐκάτεροι.

¹³¹ Webb, “Accomplishing the Picture,” 23–28; H. Maguire, *Art and Eloquence in Byzantium* (Princeton, 1981), 36–42.

¹³² Κατάνυξις ἔστιν ἀένναος συνειδότος βασανισμός (Trevisan, *Scala paradisi*, 1:255; Luibheid and Russell, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*,

That aspects of such physical asceticism occurred has been confirmed thanks to studies in the field of monastic osteoarcheology. Although Sinaitic monks' bones specifically have not been studied, the skeletal remains of St. Stephen's Monastery in Palestine formed the sample for Michael Driscoll and Susan Sheridan's research into late antique paleopathology.¹³⁵ St. Stephen's monastery was consecrated by 460.¹³⁶ The kind of asceticism practiced in this early period corresponds to the kind that inspired Climacus. From studying the interred remains at St. Stephen's, Sheridan and Driscoll found that the community members from the fifth through the eighth centuries were a "robust, healthy, well-muscled group of men who lived into their fifties"; numerous examples displayed a serious pathology, however.¹³⁷ The bones showed an "arthritic response in the majority of individuals at all sites of muscle, ligament, and tendon attachment associated with deep flexion of the knee."¹³⁸ Such pathology likely occurred as the result of genuflexion, of kneeling hundreds of times a day.¹³⁹ Thus, when Climacus says in the ekphrasis that the men appeared "with knees like wood, as a result of all of the prostrations," he may have been telling the truth.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, we may consider the implications of the above arguments to open paths for further research. But first, to summarize, we identified how Climacus achieves ekphrasis by employing numerous formal strategies. Animating the Prison required him to construct a mixed ekphrasis of people, places, times, and deeds. He wielded periegesis, ethopoeia, and ekplexis to

135 Most recently, S. G. Sheridan, "Pious Pain: Repetitive Motion Disorders from Excessive Genuflexion at a Byzantine Jerusalem Monastery," in *Pious Pain: Bioarchaeology of Intentional Suffering*, ed. S. G. Sheridan and J. Gregoricka (Berlin, 2020), 81–117.

136 Sheridan, "Pious Pain: Repetitive Motion Disorders," 83.

137 M. Driscoll and S. G. Sheridan, "Every Knee Shall Bend: A Biocultural Reconstruction of Liturgical and Ascetical Prayer in V–VII Century Palestine," *Worship* 74.5 (2000): 453–68, esp. 462.

138 Driscoll and Sheridan, "A Biocultural Reconstruction," 465–67.

139 Driscoll and Sheridan, "A Biocultural Reconstruction," 461. On kneeling, see also G. Radle, "Embodied Eschatology: The Council of Nicaea's Regulation of Kneeling and Its Reception across Liturgical Traditions," *Worship* 90 (2016): 345–71 and 433–61.

add gripping, even pummeling quality to the rhetoric. Climacus gives the doomful place a dimensionality, one meant to stimulate a dynamic engagement, a sense of immersive phantasia for his audience. To appreciate these effects requires us to move from aspects of the text's production to its reception, to how the act of listening, imagining, and remembering the imagery was inseparable from the immediate goal of monastic education. And that form of paideia was rigorously physical, at least, that is how Climacus frames its effective reception. One ought to immerse himself—and that gendered inflection is key—within the mnemotechnic structure of the Prison with the violence of a soldier and produce a belligerent zeal toward the attainment of mourning and self-reformation.

Both the descriptions of the prisoners' penitential labors as well as Climacus's intended effect on the audience challenges a dominant scholarly argument. Judging from the accounts transmitted by Theodoret, Sebastian Brock once argued that the "extravagancies" associated with Syrian ascetics, their self-imprisonment and chaining, were "in complete contrast" to the practices of late antique Egyptian monasticism.¹⁴⁰ Brock claimed Egyptian monasticism was more cenobitic while the Syrian milieu championed the lone ascetic.¹⁴¹ Yet can we chart such clear differences based on territory, especially given that both traditions stem from an ideal of the ascetic as a spiritual athlete or warrior? Climacus's individual prisoners are on par with, if not beyond, Theodoret's holy men in terms of self-imposed mortification. Whether or not the prisoners underwent such painful acts is beside the point; Climacus himself praises them in a way similar to Theodoret. But there is also another similarity between Egyptian and Syrian ascetic traditions. It regards the use of graphic discourse. What Climacus achieves with the ekphrasis is the imposition of an experience of asceticism on the audience. This strategy of imposing asceticism through description corresponds to a strategy which Christopher de Wet recently uncovered in Theodoret's writing: the Syrian author does not simply represent ascetic mortification; his account constitutes a "system of violence in

140 S. Brock, "Early Syrian Asceticism," *Numen* 20.1 (1970): 1–19, esp. 12–13.

141 Brock, "Early Syrian Asceticism," 13.

itself.”¹⁴² The violence of such a system manifests in the viewing position opened by Theodoret’s discourse and in the transformation of readers into terrified spectators.¹⁴³ The Syrian and the Egyptian milieux thus do not seem so different. Climacus’s memory prison itself was a tool for mortification.

Examining the remarkably visual character of *The Heavenly Ladder* leads us to examine it in relation to broader ritual experience and the development of medieval Christianity. Beyond the monastic walls, and beyond the seventh century, the ekphrasis shaped eschatological expectation and penitential tradition when its recitation formed the core of Lenten experience. Shortly after Climacus’s time, monks would hear *The Heavenly Ladder* and, by extension the ekphrasis, across a lifetime. By the Middle Byzantine period, Climacus’s text was read aloud three times a day, five days a week, for six weeks during the Lenten season.¹⁴⁴ This scheduled reading is found in the monastic rule of the Evergetis Monastery in Constantinople, whose practices came to influence the broader Byzantine world.¹⁴⁵ And beyond the monastery, lesser forms of the prisoners’ suffering, those states of katanyxis and penthos, came to affect all Byzantine ritual experience after Theodore the Stoudite and his brother Joseph mounted a liturgical reform in Constantinople. As an authoritative text on penitence and eschatology, *The Heavenly Ladder* undoubtedly influenced them as they composed certain hymns of *The Triodion*, in which the Divine Judge appeared vividly to the congregation.¹⁴⁶ Through this line of transmission, Climacus’s treatise

¹⁴² On ascetic discourse as a form of violence in itself in the Syrian context, see de Wet, “The Discipline of Domination,” 324.

¹⁴³ de Wet, “The Discipline of Domination,” 332.

¹⁴⁴ Ševčenko, “Monastic Challenges,” 39–62, esp. 62.

¹⁴⁵ The typicon of the Evergetis Monastery states: “... for from today we begin to read holy John Klimakos beginning from his first chapter, but only at the First Hour and in the trapeza. . . . Similarly at the First Hour also on Wednesday and Friday and Saturday throughout all of Lent the proestos reads the *katechesis* of holy Theodore the Stoudite, but on the remaining days at the First Hour about two pages from Klimakos and similarly each days also in the trapeza”: R. H. Jordan, trans., *The Synaxarion of the Monastery of the Theotokos Evergetis: March–August; The Moveable Cycle*, Belfast Byzantine Texts and Translations 6.6 (Belfast, 2005), 369, cf. 381, 389, 393, 401, 413; Ševčenko, “Monastic Challenges,” 62.

¹⁴⁶ For Theodore’s catechetical exhortations about *The Ladder*, see A. Papadopoulos-Kerameus, ed., “Epistulae 150,” *Theodori Studitiae Magna Catachesis* (St. Petersburg, 1904), 73, 98, 122.

was therefore pivotal in the formation of the Byzantine penitent, a figure that Derek Krueger has called the “liturgical subject.”¹⁴⁷ Such a Middle Byzantine community of penitential worshippers was like the holy criminals, if only in moments of tenebrous ritual song.¹⁴⁸ But whereas Climacus’s prisoners had to imagine a terrifying Judge in order to propel themselves to labor, the Middle Byzantine liturgical subjects—no longer solely men—need only stare up to the dome of a church and the portrait of the Pantokrator to find themselves in an encompassing, carceral surround.¹⁴⁹

When understood as an encomium of visible, embodied suffering, Climacus’s ekphrasis offers other criteria with which to discuss Byzantine aesthetic experience. Climacus’s ekphrasis is an invitation into a darker kind of visual experience, one far less familiar than the aesthetics of the sacred revolving around fecundity, splendor, and proportion.¹⁵⁰ Essential to Climacus’s ekphrasis is how manifestations of decay and dehumanization invite a gaze of wonder, or *thauma*. Thus far, *thauma* as a category in Byzantine thought and visual experience has not been fully explored, but the phenomenon has received study from historians of ancient Greek sculpture.¹⁵¹ Yet this enchanted engagement with the deathlike, so meticulously modeled by Climacus, is more than a rhetorical display of paradox. No matter how fixated on death and macabre topics it may seem to us, for Climacus, this dark sphere

¹⁴⁷ Krueger, *Liturgical Subjects*, 164–96.

¹⁴⁸ Krueger, *Liturgical Subjects*, 215–22.

¹⁴⁹ R. S. Binning, “Christ’s All-Seeing Eye in the Dome,” in *Aural Architecture in Byzantium: Music, Acoustics, and Ritual*, ed. B. Pentcheva (London, 2017), 101–26. On the concept of post-Iconoclastic art as a reflection of the Stoudite “liturgical dispensation”: J. Elsner, “Iconoclasm as Discourse from Antiquity to Byzantium,” *ArtB* 94.3 (2012): 368–94, esp. 383; and earlier, C. Barber, “From Transformation to Desire: Art and Worship after Byzantine Iconoclasm,” *ArtB* 75.1 (1993): 7–16.

¹⁵⁰ Hagia Sophia remains the site par excellence for thinking about the continuity of Byzantium with the notion, however nebulous, of “the Classical.” Consider the lasting impact of Herbert Hunger’s suggestion of Hagia Sophia (and naturally, its descriptive extension in panegyric) as the Byzantine cultural achievement most evocative of “survival” in his important contribution to the Thirteenth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies of 1979 at the University of Birmingham, later published as H. Hunger, “The Classical Tradition in Byzantine Literature: The Importance of Rhetoric,” in *Byzantium and the Classical Tradition*, ed. M. Mullett and R. Scott (Birmingham, 1981), 35–48, esp. 35.

¹⁵¹ See for example, R. Neer, *The Emergence of the Classical Style in Greek Sculpture* (Chicago, 2010), esp. 57–68.

of experience possessed great importance. In step six, the section following the ekphrasis, Climacus claims his painful visual practices, in fact, bear the sublime gravitas of a far older lineage: “Someone has said that you cannot pass a day devoutly unless you think of it as your last. Even the Greeks have said some such thing, for they describe philosophy as meditation on death.”¹⁵²

152 παρὰ ἀνθρώποις οὐκ ἔστι (φησὶν) οὐκ ἔστι τὴν ἐνστάσαν ἡμέραν εὐσεβῶς διεξένει, εἰ μὴ αὐτὴν ἐσχάτην παντὸς τοῦ βίου λογισώμεθα. Καὶ θαῦμα ὅντως πῶς καὶ Ἐλληνές τι τοιοῦτον ἐφθέξαντο, ἐπεὶ καὶ φιλοσοφίαν

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τοῦτο εἶναι ὁρίζονται, μελέτην θανάτου (Trevisan, *Scala paradisi*, 1:253; Luibheid and Russell, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, 134, with my modifications).

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